Pan

THE PERSUADERS!

BOOK THREE

FREDERICK E. SMITH

Based on the exciting ATV Television series
starring Tony Curtis and Roger Moore

THE PERSUADERS!

Book Three

By the same author in Pan Books

THE PERSUADERS! Books One and Two
WATERLOO

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FREDERICK E. SMITH

THE PERSUADERS!

Book Three

Based on screenplays by
Val Guest, Terence Feely and Brian Clemens

A PAN ORIGINAL

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To Sarah with love

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THE GOLD NAPOLEON

Based on the screenplay
by Val Guest

CHAPTER ONE

The man's dark head broke the surface of the glittering Mediterranean. Ahead of him was a low wall of rocks and cement slabs. Pushing the underwater goggles from his eyes, he swam along the wall until he came to a suitable landing place.

Globules of water ran off his bare shoulders as he climbed out. With the goggles up on his forehead, a jagged scar was visible alongside his right eye. In addition to two oxygen cylinders, he was also carrying a long object wrapped in polythene on his back, and with the cylinders now a dead weight, he had to pause for breath before reaching the top of the breakwater. There, finding a gap between two rocks, he sank down.

The wall was the sea perimeter of Nice airport. Ahead were the runways and buildings, beyond them the blue mountains of the Alps Maritime. Although the airport was busy with summer traffic, the sun gave the scene a drowsy quality, turning the jets into silver fish that rose or descended gracefully in the Mediterranean sky.

The man had unfastened a pair of binoculars from his belt and had them focused on a jet that was gliding from its bay and making for a departure port. Satisfied, he removed the long object from his back and slid it out of its polythene wrapping. It was a rifle with telescopic sights and a silencer. Sliding the rifle into a niche between the rocks, the man settled down behind it. Soon the only sound and move-

ment came from the small waves, lapping against the rocks below.

The blare of the tannoy sounded above the distant whine of jets. 'Ladies and Gentlemen. We announce the departure of Flight 651 to London. Will all passengers please proceed to Gate No. 7 . . .'

One by one the passengers filed through the open glass door into the hot sunshine of the airport. One was a dark-haired, attractive girl whose shapely figure was well-served by a pair of tight-fitting slacks and a bolero. In one hand she was carrying an open-topped beach bag that contained a sketch book and a folding canvas stool. Under her other arm was tucked a small collapsible easel.

Directly behind her was a tanned, athletic man carrying a small handcase. Nattily-dressed, he was eyeing the girl's tight slacks with an almost professional interest. Danny Wilde, self-made American millionaire and ex-playboy, was seeing what he liked most to see and was liking what he was seeing. He had already tried a loud cough without success and was considering his next ploy when the girl, switching the easel from one arm to the other, accidentally dropped the beach bag. As it hit the ground it toppled over, spilling out among other items the sketch book and the canvas stool.

Ever the opportunist, Danny was ahead of the girl in two strides and began scooping up the spilled items. As he picked up the sketch book it fell open, revealing an ink drawing of Napoleon III. Drawn in relief it was encircled as by the rim of a coin and the effect was striking. Danny stared at it, then gazed up approvingly at the girl.

'An artist, huh?'

The girl took the sketch book from him and pushed it with some haste into the beach bag. Although Danny's intention to chat her up was transparent enough, his grin and words had a disarming quality that brought a smile from her.

'How did you guess?'

Although she answered him in English, her voice had a

delicious French accent. Dropping the last of the items into the bag, Danny straightened. 'I owe it to my mother. She was psychic too.'

Before the girl could answer there was a cheer from the building behind them. From the restaurant on the roof, a tall, sunburned figure dressed impeccably in a linen suit was leaning against the balcony rail. Brett Sinclair, English aristocrat and as great an authority on pulchritude as Danny himself, had a glass of champagne in his hand and was clearly toasting Danny's success. Alongside him were two beautiful smiling girls, also with glasses in their hands. Danny gave Brett a dark look and then the French girl a shamefaced grin. 'My friends! Seeing me off.'

The girl smiled and glanced at the jet. 'Shouldn't we be getting on board?'

'We should,' Danny agreed. Arming himself with the portable easel he gave Brett a last look before taking the girl's arm. The two had gone forward no more than six yards before the girl gave a scream, spun round, and fell to the ground. Dumbfounded, Danny stared down at her for a moment before dropping on his knees and cradling her head in his arms.

The scream caught the attention of both passengers and airport officials and half a dozen men began running towards them. To his amazement Danny found blood on the girl's left shoulder and arm. As he spun round he saw a distant flash on the airport perimeter as the sun momentarily caught the gunman's goggles. As the first two men reached the girl, one wearing the uniform of the airport ambulance service, Danny jumped to his feet and began running hell-for-leather towards an empty jeep. Leaping aboard he revved up the engine and raced the jeep towards the distant rocks.

Meanwhile Brett had also seen the flash of sunlight and, from his higher vantage point, the distant figure of the gun man stowing away his rifle. Ignoring the screams of the two girls he vaulted over the balcony rail, found a drainage pipe, and slid down to the ground. A hundred yards away three

small helicopters were parked in a bay and Brett headed straight for them. Pushing aside a mechanic, he jumped into the nearest machine, started the engine, and in less than thirty seconds was swooping low over the airport after Danny's speeding jeep.

Pulling up with a scream of brakes at the sea wall Danny leapt out, clambered over a pile of rocks, and stood scanning the length of the perimeter. At first he could see nothing, then his eyes fixed on a series of stains on a slab of cement twenty yards to his left. Climbing down he discovered the marks came from a frogman's wet flippers, now rapidly drying in the hot sun. As Brett's helicopter came swooping low over him Danny jabbed a finger at the sea. Getting the message Brett peeled away and commenced a wave to wave search.

The wail of sirens made Danny turn. Two vans of airport security police were streaking across the field towards him. As the first group of uniformed men clambered over the sea wall, Danny did his best to make himself understood.

'I think the hit man was a frogman. Yeah. He came out of the water and escaped that way. Vous comprenez?'

The officer in charge, a portly, sweating man with a military moustache, gave a frown. 'Frogman, monsieur! What is a frogman?'

'You know, a guy who swims like a frog.' Danny's efforts to imitate a frog made two of the policemen stare at one another. The portly officer, less impressed by Danny's histrionics, pointed at the jeep Danny had borrowed.

'That tender, monsieur. Why did you run away in it?'

'Run away! What are you talking about. I came after this gunman.' Suddenly Danny was looking aghast. 'You guys don't think I did it, do you?'

The officer shrugged. 'You are the one who is behaving strangely, monsieur.'

'That's crazy. I ran after this frogman.' Danny swung round and pointed. 'Look, there are his footprints. A dead give-away. He came out of the sea, climbed on that slab and...'

Danny's voice died away in dismay. The sun had dried up the last vestiges of moisture and the slab of cement was unmarked. A moment later, when Brett came swooping back, he saw the forlorn Danny being marched towards a van by a phalanx of policemen.

Danny, bristling with indignation, marched across the study and thumped a fist on the desk. 'They won't let me go. You've got to do something.'

The man who gazed up at him had a benign, unlined face although he was in his middle sixties. Bald except for a white moustache and fringes of silver hair, he looked both distinguished and amused. It was not the first time Judge Fulton had seen Danny in one of his indignant moods and his blue eyes had a twinkle in them.

'They're not holding you, Danny. They're merely requesting you not to leave the country. Which sounds reasonable enough to me.'

'Reasonable?' Danny snorted. 'What's reasonable about it?' Swinging round he pointed at the smiling Brett who, with an opened newspaper in front of him, was sprawled out in an armchair at the other side of the judge's well-appointed study. 'Why not him? Or twenty or thirty passengers who were also around at the time?'

The Judge shrugged. 'Apparently they were all a good distance from you when the shot was fired.'

'What's distance got to do with it? They've cleared me of having anything to do with the shooting. Or haven't they?'

The Judge nodded. 'They've cleared you of attempted murder, yes.'

'All right. So why can't I go?'

'Danny, haven't you asked yourself who would want to shoot a young girl like that?' The question came from Brett.

Danny stared at him. 'How should I know? That's a police problem. I've got my own.'

Brett lowered the newspaper. 'You have. Because it's possible that shot was meant for you.'

The American's mouth fell open. 'Me? Who would want to shoot me?'

Brett pretended to consider the question. 'Let's see ... It could be any one of four outraged fathers, at least three disappointed dollies, two Consul-Generals – that's all I can think of at the moment but there are certain to be more.'

Danny scowled. 'The French knew how to deal with aristocrats.' He made a karate chop. 'Hai!'

Brett yawned. 'Some of us survived.'

'They should have mass-produced guillotines,' Danny muttered, turning back to the Judge. 'There's nothing to stop me leaving the country any time I like, right?'

'Legally, no. However, I've given my personal assurance you won't. It's only until they've completed their investigation ...

'Which shouldn't take more than six months,' Brett added.

'Oh, funny, funny!'

Brett shrugged. 'You can't expect gems all the time.'

Danny's face suddenly brightened. 'I've got it. The girl's got a jealous lover.'

'With telescopic sights and flippers?' Brett asked scornfully.

'Brett's right,' Fulton said. 'It was planned too professionally.'

'So you also think the shot was meant for me?'

The Judge hesitated. 'I don't know. But it's possible. You two have been somewhat active along this coast from time to time.'

'And whose fault is that?' Danny asked accusingly. As he moved restlessly from the desk, Brett folded his newspaper to a selected paragraph and began reading.

'This might amuse you, Danny. "Many people are wondering whether the shot that wounded Michelle Devigne was intended for Danny Wilde, the International Jet-Set playboy, pictured here at the Monte Carlo Rally ..." ' As Danny snorted, Brett raised his head, 'I must say Michelle Devigne

is a great looking girl. But why do you always look so furtive in photographs?'

Danny, who was pacing up and down the lounge, suddenly checked his stride. 'Wait a minute. Does it say where she is?'

Before the surprised Brett could reply, the American snatched away the newspaper and began scanning the paragraph. 'Where they took her, dumb, dumb! The name of the hospital.'

With a pitying look, Brett glanced at the Judge. 'Just say a great-looking girl to him and he can't wait to storm the operating theatre.'

Danny's voice turned triumphant. 'Here it is! Hospital de la Madeleine.' Throwing the paper on Brett's lap, he hurried across the room.

Brett stared after him. 'Aren't we being a trifle impetuous?'

Danny's reply came through the open door. 'They want to question me, so I want to question her. Even Stephan.' As Brett and the Judge exchanged glances, the American's footsteps faded down the corridor.

CHAPTER TWO

The nurse opened the door of the small private ward and gave its inmate a smile. 'You have a visitor, mademoiselle. Your American uncle.'

The attractive girl in bed with a sketch book on her lap was Michelle Devigne. She looked puzzled as she slipped a bed-jacket round her shoulders. 'American uncle?'

'Yes, mademoiselle. I said he could see you for a few minutes.'

Before Michelle could reply, Danny appeared in the open doorway, a large bouquet of flowers in his hand. He gave the surprised Michelle a bright smile. 'Hi! Had to say a relative or they wouldn't have let me up.'

While the two women stared at him, he bustled into the room, keeping a flow of conversation going as he found an empty vase and dropped the flowers into it. 'Had to come and see how you are. Couldn't leave things as they were yesterday.' Putting the vase of flowers on the bedside table, Danny stood back to admire his handiwork. 'Beautiful, huh? Nothing like flowers to brighten up a room.'

Seeing the nurse was about to protest, Michelle caught her eye. Smiling at their conspiracy, the woman nodded and withdrew. As the door closed Danny sank somewhat thankfully into a bedside chair.

'How's the shoulder?'

'It's only a flesh wound,' the girl told him. 'It's sore but the doctor says I should be out in a few days.' She reached for one of the newspapers lying on her bed. 'I've been reading about you.'

Danny hastily pushed the newspapers aside. 'You're lucky. That wound could have been much worse.'

'Yes; I suppose so.'

'We tried to capture the guy, you know. But somehow he got away.'

Although Danny's remarks were light, he was watching the girl closely for a reaction of any kind. In turn she was studying him as she drew her pad back on her knees and began to sketch. 'I can't get over your being Danny Wilde,' she said.

Danny grinned. 'You'll get over it. Believe me, you will.'

The girl deftly sketched a likeness of the American. 'I've heard all about your – exploits. Is that the right word?'

Danny shifted uncomfortably. 'It's as good a word as any.'

Michelle paused, suddenly serious. 'Was someone really trying to kill you?'

'Everyone seems to think so. Particularly the police.'

'But you? What do you think?'

Alert for a reaction, Danny scratched his ear. 'Well, I see it this way. It had to be either me – or you.'

The girl's lovely eyes widened. Then, to Danny's disappointment, she broke into a laugh. 'Me! That's funny. Ridiculous.'

'Why ridiculous?' Danny asked.

The girl's amusement appeared totally genuine. 'Because I'm nobody. Who on earth would want to kill me?'

Back in the Judge's villa Brett and Fulton were discussing Danny's adventure. Brett was smiling wickedly. 'If someone's after him, we'll have to get rid of him for his own safety. I suggest my great-uncle's safari club in the wilds of Tanzania. That way I might have a peaceful season this year.'

Fulton frowned. 'Be serious, Brett. Are you convinced the bullet was meant for him?'

'He was a good eighteen feet clear of anyone else. No professional sniper could make a six yard mistake.'

Fulton glanced down and smoothed the newspaper that was now resting on the desk before him. 'That is, if you discount the girl.'

Brett sat up sharply in his armchair. 'Are you saying you don't?'

The Judge's bald head rose slowly. For a moment he held Brett's gaze, then he looked down again at the newspaper, his finger tracing the print as he read:

'Mademoiselle Devigne lives with her uncle, one of Monte Carlo's exclusive jewellers . . .'

'I've read it,' Brett interrupted.

Fulton ignored him and continued: 'Mademoiselle Devigne had been voted the most talented student at the Valouris Art Centre before her sudden decision to continue her studies in London . . .'

Brett was looking puzzled now. 'You're not coming through, Judge.'

Fulton jabbed a finger at the newsprint. Watching him, Brett recognized the jurist beginning to attack a challenging problem. '*Sudden* is the key word. "Before her sudden decision".' Fulton's eyes lifted. 'Why sudden?'

'Why not? People do leave suddenly.' Brett grinned. 'Danny, for example.'

'Danny doesn't deal in gold,' Fulton said, rising.

Brett blinked as the Judge went to the door and motioned him to follow. The two men went down the corridor and entered a small filing room. Bookcases, shelves, and filing cabinets covered the walls and two large tables were littered with large packages of legal folders and files. Fulton crossed over to a tall nest of shelves on top of which were four metal filing boxes. From his vantage point by the door Brett could see they were labelled A–G, H–M, N–S and T–Z respectively. Showing some incredulity, he followed the older man across the room.

'Are you seriously suggesting that girl is involved in some kind of illegal racket?'

Fulton answered him without glancing back. 'I've no evidence to suggest anything yet. But her uncle is Maurice Devigne, the jeweller who specializes in gold coins, medals and plaques.' Before Brett could react, the older man's voice mused on: 'A most interesting case. A clever twisting of the law... Ah, there they are. Would you oblige, Brett? You are taller than I. A–G, if you please.'

Brett saw the Judge pointing at the metal filing boxes. Reaching up he drew out the required file. 'I'm certain you'll tell me eventually what you're talking about.'

His sarcasm went right over the Judge's head as the older man, rummaging in the file, went on: 'Devigne was caught selling a gold Napoleon 100 franc piece which turned out to be counterfeit....'

Before he could continue, Brett gave a start of interest. 'I see. These are your special "Finks who Got Away With It" files!'

Fulton nodded. 'As I say, Devigne's case is one of the most intriguing. His defence was that, as he wasn't certain about the coin, he charged only its market value.'

'And he got off because that's not illegal?'

'Correct.'

'But surely it's illegal to sell unauthorized gold?'

'It is. But not in the form of coins.'

Brett's interest was growing. 'Counterfeit or otherwise?'

'Precisely. And that is the twist.'

Brett moved closer. 'What's in the file about the girl?'

The Judge almost looked surprised. 'Her? Oh, nothing. I know absolutely nothing about the girl.'

As Brett showed some mystification, Fulton turned and removing some books from a shelf revealed a small wall safe. He glanced back over his shoulder as he opened it.

'Have you ever seen a gold Napoleon?'

Brett lifted a quizzical eyebrow. 'No. But I knew that one day you'd show me one.'

Fulton drew a tissue-wrapped coin from the safe and held it out to Brett. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Brett took the coin and moved nearer the window.

'Of course, it's counterfeit,' Fulton said before Brett could comment.

Intrigued, Brett examined the coin more closely. 'You're saying it has no value as a collector's item but is literally worth its weight in gold?'

'Exactly. Which is why hundreds of them appear periodically in Paris, Rome, Geneva and Beirut.'

Brett lifted an eyebrow again. 'It sounds a good way of unloading stolen gold bullion.'

'Precisely. Mind you, Devigne has no capacity to run an operation of that size but you can see how he could be used.'

Brett nodded. 'I can see something else. Which I assume is your point.'

The Judge's blue eyes gazed at him ingenuously. 'Go on.'

'You're saying this racket is so big that the people involved will kill to keep it going?'

When Fulton did not answer, Brett motioned at the gold coin in his hand. 'May I keep this for a while?'

'By all means.' Fulton closed the safe and replaced the books before his quiet voice made Brett start. 'Yes, Brett. I think that is a possibility well worth exploring.'

The charm of Danny's smile would have brought birds

tumbling down from the trees. 'Tell me more about yourself. Please. I'm interested.'

Michelle laughed. 'What can I tell you? There is so little to know.'

Danny picked her sketch pad up from the bed and began flicking through it. 'What about all these sketches? Aren't they something to talk about?'

The girl's cheeks flushed attractively. 'Oh, that. I sketch, I do a little clay modelling, engraving, lithography . . . I'm a Jill of all trades and mistress of none.' She laughed again. 'In fact I live a very uneventful life, Mr Wilde.'

Although Danny was smiling, he was still watching her closely. 'Being an artist is an exciting life. And you're good.'

A dimple appeared in the girl's cheek. 'Now you're putting me on.'

'No, I'm not. That ink portrait was a knockout.'

As if a pebble had been thrown into clear water, the girl's eyes clouded. 'What ink portrait?'

'The one you had at the airport,' Danny said, missing nothing.

This time Michelle perceptibly stiffened. In command now, Danny rose and without taking his eyes off the girl adjusted her pillow. 'You don't look comfortable. That's better.'

The girl quickly regained her composure and Danny found himself unable to decide whether her change of subject was deliberate or otherwise.

'I'd much rather talk about you. Are they really true – all the things I've heard and read about you?'

Danny grinned as he dropped back into his chair. 'Don't believe everything you read or hear. Who was he?'

Once again the American saw his question jarred the girl although this time the glance he got was guarded. 'Who was who?'

'You know. The guy in your other sketch book?'

At that moment a nurse entered the ward. 'Mademoiselle, you have another visitor. Monsieur Devigne.'

The girl could not hide her relief at the interuption. 'Thank you. Please bring him in.'

An elderly man with a kindly but lined and worried face appeared in the doorway. Michelle showed her pleasure at seeing him. 'Hello, uncle.'

Danny rose from his chair as the old man hurried forward. 'Michelle, I've just heard. I came as soon as they would allow me.'

Bending over the bed he hugged the girl tightly. She gave a laugh of protest. 'Be careful. My shoulder's still sore.'

Hurriedly the old man released her. His concern made him oblivious of Danny's presence.

'What happened? Is it serious? Are you . . . ?'

Michelle reached up and put a hand over his mouth. 'Stop worrying, uncle. I'm all right. It's only a flesh wound.'

Danny, a forgotten spectator, cleared his throat. 'Well, I'll be going and leave you two alone.'

The old man turned sharply. There was both surprise and alarm in his expression and although Danny was intrigued, he tried to reassure him with a laugh as he backed towards the door. 'Hello. I was just keeping her company until you arrived.'

Michelle tried her own note of reassurance. 'This is Mr Wilde, uncle. Mr Wilde – my uncle Monsieur Devigne.'

Before the old man could react, Danny gave him a wave from the door. 'Hello and goodbye, sir. Nice to have met you. See you at the Academy,' he threw at Michelle before disappearing.

The old man waited until the door closed before turning back to the girl. His brow was furrowed and his voice agitated.

'Why did you run away? What made you do it?'

The girl looked pale. With her love for the old man evident in her every expression, it was clearly a moment she had been dreading. 'I trusted you, uncle. You know that. I believed in you. . . .'

Devigne avoided her eyes. 'You went to the foundry, didn't you?'

'Do you blame me?'

'Why didn't you tell me? I could have explained . . .'

'Explained what? That those moulds I made for the Napoleonic coin were not intended for bronze replicas?'

The old man sank into the chair Danny had vacated. Voice pleading, he held out a pair of trembling, arthritic hands. 'Look at them, Michelle. I can no longer do the work myself. So what choice had I but to ask you to do the moulds for me?'

'Without telling me what they were for?' As the old man's head sank in shame, the girl went on: 'I don't understand you. You don't need to do this. You still have your shop.'

The glance she received made her start. 'You've lost control of it, haven't you? But why? That shop was your life. Why have you let it go?'

'I had no choice, Michelle. A syndicate came and said they wanted to take over.'

'A syndicate!' Suspicion turned the girl's face pale. 'What are you involved in, Uncle? What kind of syndicate?'

The old man laid a pleading hand on her arm. 'Please, Michelle. No more questions. Not unless you want to see me rot in jail for the rest of my life.'

The girl drew back. 'You lied to me. You said you'd learned your lesson when you were arrested before. In the foundry I saw the kind of lesson you'd learned. The coins you were minting weren't bronze – they were gold. Don't lie to me – I saw them.'

Desperation tightened Devigne's grip on her arm. 'Stop talking and listen. Someone saw you leave the foundry and later they saw you buy an airline ticket. Don't you understand what that means?'

The girl was now pale to the lips. 'Who saw me?'

'Never mind that. They panicked – they thought you were going to cause trouble. They believed they had to stop you.'

Eyes wide with shock, Michelle sank back against her pillow. 'Then it was me. I see it all now. That bullet was meant for me. And as it missed, perhaps they'll try again.'

CHAPTER THREE

The protesting Devigne was displaying a rabbit-like courage. 'They tried to kill her, Pullicino. Do you realize that?'

The man he was addressing was well-built and stocky, with a tanned, hard face. He was impeccably dressed in Riviera casuals: white slacks, a blue blazer and an alpaca hat. A dominant man, his attitude to the agitated Devigne was all concern and sympathy but at the same time it was obvious he was in complete command of the situation.

Both men were standing in a roadside clearing that had been turned into a Wild West ranch for children. In the foreground was a mock saloon that advertised and sold soft drinks. Behind it was a barbecue site and half hidden among the trees was a small log house. Three men dressed in chaps and stetsons were leading ponies around the clearing. The ponies' riders were small children wearing pieces of western apparel lent them by the management. The cowboys themselves, while authentically dressed, were hard, bulky characters who looked less like cow-hands than muscle men.

One of the children riding round the clearing was an attractive eight-year old girl dressed in a smart cowgirl outfit. She was Maria, Pullicino's daughter, and in spite of Devigne's protestations, the Italian's eyes kept straying towards her.

The old man was half-frantic with shock. 'Are you listening to me, Pullicino? They tried to kill my niece.'

Pullicino nodded sympathetically. 'It's a terrible thing, I agree. As you know, I was away at the time. But don't worry. They'll be adequately punished.'

His apparent penitence gave the old man fresh courage. 'If anyone as much as touches her again, Pullicino . . . !'

'My dear Devigne, I know exactly how you feel. And I'm as horrified as you are.'

'Why should anyone believe she would talk? What can she talk about? Only about me and she'd never do that. As far as you are concerned, she doesn't even know you exist.'

Pullicino laid a powerful arm round the old man's trembling shoulders. 'I know why you came, Devigne. It was to promise me your niece will make no more foolish moves. Am I not right?'

It was an approach that threw Devigne off balance. He stared up at the man's hard, smiling face. 'Of course. I've already had a talk with her. But . . .'

The Italian patted the old man's shoulder. 'Excellent. You and I will keep to our ends of the bargain, your niece will stay here and keep her mouth shut, and everything will be fine. I'm happy you see it that way, Devigne.'

His attention moved to the roadside where a white Mercedes had drawn up behind Devigne's car. Two men were alighting. One, named Jacoby, was a small ferrety man, expensively over-dressed. The second man, named Furneau was more powerfully built. Wearing slacks and a casual, American-type shirt, he had a scar alongside his right eye. As the two men hurried towards him, the Italian guided the old man towards his car.

'Don't worry any more. Go back to your shop knowing that all will be well. Arrivederci.'

Devigne gave him a last anxious look before obeying. As the two newcomers passed him, they exchanged glances. Their mood changed to apprehension as they neared Pullicino, whose low voice had the venom of a silenced automatic.

'So you arranged to have the girl killed. What sort of primitive animals are you?'

Furneau was the first to find his courage. 'You weren't here so someone had to make a decision.'

He received the full impact of Pullicino's anger. 'And so you made one. A blundering, panic decision that made her the centre of interest of every policeman and pressman on the Riviera.'

The tense Furneau dragged a folded Nice-Matin from his trouser pocket. 'No. At least not any more. Read this!'

Ignoring the newspaper, the Italian moved menacingly closer. 'We are moving two and a half million dollars of gold through that old man and I give you this solemn warning, Furneau. If what you did jeopardizes our operation, your family can start lighting candles for you.'

Furneau's tongue licked his dry lips. Before he could answer there was an excited cry from Maria. 'Daddy! I did a jump! Really I did.' She appealed to the man leading her pony. 'It was a real jump, wasn't it?'

The change in Pullicino was startling. From the ice-cold executioner he became the smiling, adoring father. 'Well, isn't that something? How high did you jump, cowgirl?'

'Oh, ever so high. And I'm going to do it again. You watch, Daddy. Watch me. . . .'

'I'm watching,' Pullicino called as the man led the girl's pony away. Tentatively, Furneau held out the newspaper again.

'If you read this, you'll see the police aren't interested in the girl any more. They think the shot was meant for someone else.'

Pullicino's gaze was still on the girl. 'A Mr Danny Wilde. I also read the newspapers, Furneau.'

The man's voice was eager. 'Then surely we're in the clear?'

Pullicino turned, his smile snapping off as if controlled by a thermostatic switch. 'Thinking it was meant for him isn't enough, you fool. They have to be certain.'

Furneau's question made it clear he wanted to make no more mistakes. 'What do you want us to do? Give them more evidence?'

A joyous cry from the girl drew the Italian's attention again. His matter-of-fact voice told the two men the interview was at an end. 'Remove their doubts altogether. Go and kill him!'

■ • •

The seafront at Villefranche was a blaze of colour and movement. The glittering sea broke whitely on a beach that was crowded with tanned men and bikini-clad girls. Expensive yachts filled the harbour and sightseers strolled along the narrow seafront road or sat outside pavement cafés. Brett and Danny were among them. Danny, unusual for him, was occupied by his problem and was holding forth at some length.

'So suddenly I stop and ask myself – who cares if the girl does act strange? Who am I, Sherlock Holmes? No. I'm Danny Wilde with my own problems in London. So after lunch, which I'll allow you to buy me, Danny boy is up and away – even if he has to charter his own plane.'

Brett turned to appreciate the charms of a scantily dressed brunette. 'Are you feeling all right?'

Danny stared at him. 'Yes. Why?'

'Because I've never seen you so blind before. Girls everywhere and you're babbling on about this airport affair. Why don't you forget it a while and enjoy the scenery?'

'Oh, sure, sure. Any guy ought to relax when bullets are whistling around him.'

'You don't know that bullet was meant for you. If the Judge's theory is correct, it might have been for the girl.'

'It's a pity you two can't make up your minds,' Danny snorted. 'But in any case I'll tell you something. At this moment I don't care if the bullet was marked His or Hers. I'm still going to London.'

Reaching the restaurant of his choice, Brett led the American towards a table. 'I admire your gallantry.'

He signalled a waiter towards them. Breathing hard, Danny leaned across the table. 'Furthermore, Judge Fulton can take his personal assurances and . . .'

'Americana,' Brett told the smiling waiter.

'Lemonade,' Danny grunted, sinking into his chair.

Brett raised an eyebrow. 'Lemonade? That girl really has done something to you.'

Danny's hackles rose again. 'She's done nothing to me.'

'Then perhaps you weren't her type.'

The American's glance was withering. 'How does a man's mind become so decadent?'

'That's easy. It's hereditary.'

The waiter arrived with the drinks. As he left, Brett's mood changed. 'You know, Danny, if she lives with her uncle and he is a part of this Napoleon racket, then they're also mixed up with some less-than-lovable characters – people with endearing little habits like picking travellers off at airports.'

Danny's shrug of indifference carried no conviction. 'Bully for them.' About to take a drink from his glass, he pushed it sarcastically towards Brett. 'Want to taste this first in case it's poisoned?'

Before Brett could answer, the sound of a speeding car made both men turn sharply. A huge white Mercedes, driven murderously down the narrow road, was scattering pedestrians in all directions. As it neared the restaurant it suddenly swung in and made straight for Danny and Brett. As tables were hurled in all directions, Brett yelled a warning and both men dived for safety across the sidewalk. The car smashed into their table, hurling it aside and smashing the chairs to matchwood. Brakes squealing hideously, the Mercedes skidded back on to the road and disappeared at speed round the corner of an hotel, leaving women screaming and men shouting abuse.

Flat on the sidewalk, behind a battlefield of broken chairs and tables, the two men cautiously raised their heads. Danny, his face dust-smeared and a splinter of wood resting on his dark hair, gave Brett a look that was both comic and dismayed. 'So it's the girl they're after, huh? Just so long as I can be sure . . .'

The table in Brett's hotel suite was set for two but one meal remained uneaten. Danny, his face fretful and angry, was pacing up and down by the sunlit window. Brett, who was finishing the lunch with a liqueur, gave him a grin.

'I promise you – you'll like it in Tanzania. It's a bit primitive but the Viscount Chesterfield is an excellent host. If

you're polite to him he might even help you bag a wildebeeste.'

Danny ceased his pacing, his voice hard. 'Listen! Nobody aims a dirty white car at my drink and gets away with it. You want to get me out of this town, you'll have to deport me.'

Brett glanced at his watch and rose. 'There's a plane leaving for London in fifty minutes. Do have something to eat. You know how shock affects some people.'

Danny scowled after him as he disappeared into the adjacent room. 'What do they call the Auto Registration Bureau out here? I'm going to get me a list and trace that car.'

Brett re-appeared, carrying two of Danny's suitcases that were still packed and labelled from the earlier flight. 'Why not?' he asked, dumping the cases near the table. 'There can't be more than a couple of thousand like it around here.'

'With dented front bumpers?' Danny demanded.

Brett turned in the doorway. 'That's different. Now there's only a thousand. It's still Tanzania.'

He disappeared again. The frustrated Danny half-followed him. 'Forget Tanzania. I've just declared open season here so I can bag that car.'

Brett reappeared with two more suitcases which he set down alongside the others. 'I wish you'd make up your mind. First you were set on going to London. Now you want to stay and trace untraceable cars. Can't you see how easy it would make it for them to ambush you?'

'Why the big worry about me all of a sudden?'

Brett paused as if giving the question thought. 'Maybe I'd rather hate you alive than dead.'

Danny gave him a glare. 'Why don't you make up your own mind? At the Judge's villa you thought it was me they were after. At the café you said it's not me, it's the girl. Maybe I look so much like the girl someone drives a car at me.'

Brett's eyes twinkled. 'You said it, not I.'

'Oh, funny, funny. One of these days those jokes are going to kill somebody. You.'

'Of course, there is a third possibility. They might be gunning for both of you.'

Danny showed his disgust. 'Both of us now. I talk to the girl twice and all of a sudden we're Bonny and Clyde. I don't understand how that mind of yours works.'

Brett lifted an eyebrow. 'Of course you don't. Oscar Wilde was right. The English and the Americans are two peoples separated by a common language.'

'Well, do me a favour and stop doing me favours,' Danny grunted.

'In that case, who pays for the lunch?'

'Who pays? I didn't eat anything.'

'You still ordered it,' Brett told him. He pulled out a coin from his pocket. 'Call.'

As he flipped it, Danny grabbed the coin in midair and slapped it on the back of his own hand. 'Heads.'

Brett gave the American a look as he uncovered the coin. 'You win. But remember. One day I'll find out how you do it and then.... What is it?'

The coin was the gold Napoleon Brett had borrowed from the Judge and Danny was staring down at it with considerable excitement. 'That guy! Who is he?'

'Napoleon the Third. Although I doubt if you know him.'

'That's where you're wrong. He was the guy in Michelle's sketchbook.'

It was Brett's turn to look surprised. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. He was staring me right in the face just before the shot was fired.'

Brett gave a grimace. 'Then the Judge had better know. Let's go and find him.'

The coin in his hand, Judge Fulton paced the full length of his study and back before giving his opinion. 'It's an interesting speculation, gentlemen. A very interesting one.'

It was an understatement that earned Danny's disgust.

'Interesting? It all figures. A prize-winning art student – making extra bread by working for uncle. Like sketching for counterfeit coins.'

'Don't forget there's more to it than that,' Brett reminded him. 'There's the engraving and the lithography.'

Danny's sarcasm had an icy edge. 'With the compliments of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Michelle does that too.'

'Does what?'

'Engraves and lithographs.'

Brett made a face. 'In that case . . .' He held out his hand to the Judge. 'May I?'

Fulton handed him back the coin. 'Of course. Good luck.'

Danny's suspicious eyes moved from Fulton to Brett. 'Where are you going?'

He received a bright smile from the Englishman. 'Prospecting. What did you think?' Before Danny could react Brett vanished through the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

The bronze Aston-Martin purred down the Monte Carlo street and drew up outside a jeweller's shop. Above the elegant frontage, in tasteful gold lettering, were the words DEVIGNE ET CIE. Brett's eyes moved down and studied the contents of the windows before he left the car and entered the shop.

A man's voice greeted him. 'Bonjour, monsieur.'

The shop was dark after the bright sunlight and it was a second or two before Brett's eyes adjusted and he saw an old man standing in the doorway of a rear room. Recognizing Devigne from Danny's description, Brett clicked his heels together in military style and spoke in a gutteral German accent.

'Guten Tag, monsieur. We are interested in your coins.'

Smiling, the old man came forward. 'Ah yes, coins. What sort do you have in mind, monsieur?'

'The best,' Brett said stiffly. 'Always we are only interested in the best. My late father, General Von Graumann' – Brett's head bowed in momentary homage – 'Used to say "the best is not best enough".' Frowning he waved the expression aside. 'Nein. It does not translate well.'

Devigne hurried behind one of the glass counters and began laying velvet-lined trays on it. 'Well, monsieur, we have a wide selection. From these superb gold ones – several in almost mint condition – to some extremely rare silver specimens, as in this second tray. In addition we ourselves mint a very fine bronze replica of the popular 100 franc gold Napoleon III.'

As he laid another tray full of bronze Napoleons on the counter, Brett took Fulton's gold coin from his pocket and held it out innocently.

'Like this one – nein?'

Eyeing it a trifle warily, Devigne took the coin and inspected it. 'Ah, yes. A particularly fine specimen, monsieur.'

'Of course,' Brett said. 'I ask myself – is it genuine or is it counterfeit?'

Devigne gave a slight start. 'I beg your pardon.'

Brett's voice had a sly innocence. 'As I understand it, there are many good copies around, nicht wahr?'

The old man cleared his throat. 'There are indeed, sir. You are quite correct.'

Brett flashed a Teutonic smile and clicked his heels again. 'We Von Graumanns try to be correct. My father, the General, would say "Any domkopf can be incorrect. But to not be a domkopt is more correct".' He laughed heavily. 'Is gut, ja? In Deutsch it is even better.'

Managing a smile, Devigne offered the coin back to Brett. Ignoring it Brett leaned confidentially over the counter. 'You, mein Herr, you will tell me the correctness of this coin, please.'

Looking reluctant, Devigne put a glass to his eyes. After

thirty seconds he laid the coin on the counter. 'This is my personal opinion only, you understand.'

'Of course, mein Herr. And that is?'

'It is a very fine work but only a copy. It is not genuine.'

Expecting Brett to show disappointment, the old man was surprised to receive a smile. 'Ah, so! And its value, mein Herr?'

Hedging, Devigne picked up the coin again. 'As I said, it is only a counterfeit . . .'

Brett's voice was full of meaning. 'Jawohl – but the metal is genuine. That I know.'

Devigne hesitated. 'In that case . . .'

'In that case, mein Herr?'

The old man weighed the coin in his hand 'The market value of the gold alone would be approximately 150 dollars.'

Brett grimaced with some distaste. 'We prefer to speak in Deutsch marks.'

Devigne handed the coin back to him. 'In that case I will have to check with my currency conversion table.' As he turned to find it Brett's quiet voice arrested him.

'Even better, I would like to hear it in Reich marks.'

Devigne turned with a start. 'Reich marks?'

Brett's eye held him. 'Or, if you wish me to be more precise, in Reich gold.'

The old man showed his bewilderment. 'I'm afraid I don't understand you, monsieur.'

Instantly Brett was all charm. 'But of course – you wish me to explain. It is really quite simple, mein Herr. I am in the same trade as yourself. And like you, I represent big interests.'

The old man's expression was a mixture of curiosity and guarded caution. Before he could answer Brett's eyes moved to the door of the rear room. 'You have an office, no? Where we may perhaps speak more privately?'

Still unsure of his visitor, Devigne gave a hesitant nod. 'Very well.'

Brett was led into a small, somewhat untidy room full of expensive silverware, pieces of jewellery, and antique clocks.

A small rolltop desk, littered with invoices, stood beneath a grilled window through which Brett could see into a yard. Glancing round the office appraisingly Brett ran his fingers over the delicate gold filigree on a French clock.

'Beautiful,' he murmured. 'Wunderbar!'

Devigne, lowering himself into the swivel chair behind the desk, watched his visitor cautiously. 'Yes; we do have some very beautiful pieces.'

Both men were clearly waiting for the other's move. Brett took out a gold cigarette case from his pocket and offered it to Devigne. When the old man shook his head, Brett selected a cigarette and drew on it lingeringly.

'I also possess something beautiful, Herr Devigne. A steel chest which my father raised from the Wansee lake in Bavaria. It was part of the famous Reichbank gold convoy that Adolf Hitler tried to move to Switzerland.'

Something moved in the old man's eyes but his cautious voice gave little away. 'Yes; I suppose it still has a certain curiosity value.'

Brett blew a triumphant cloud of smoke in the old man's direction. 'This chest has more than curiosity value, mein Herr. It contained twenty-two solid gold ingots!'

This time Devigne could not hide a start. Yet his caution remained strong and the sound of the shop door opening clearly came as a relief to him. The voices that followed suggested a mother and daughter from a touring coach party.

'Are you sure, Carol? It looks a very expensive shop to me.'

'Oh, mother, don't be silly. They can't charge much for a keyring.'

Apologizing for the interruption, Devigne rose. 'If you will excuse me, monsieur.'

Brett inclined his head. 'Of course.'

As the old man hurried out, Brett did a quick survey of the office. As he reached the window and began searching through the papers on the desk, his attention was drawn to the scene in the yard outside. Two men were working on a large white Mercedes whose nearside front wing had re-

cently been re-sprayed. Although Brett knew neither of the men, one was Jacoby and the other Furneau. Jacoby was examining the offside wheel while Furneau was tearing brown paper off the chrome of a newly-fitted headlight.

Fumbling in his pocket Brett found a match booklet and began scribbling the car's registration number on it. At that moment Devigne appeared. Unruffled, Brett waved the booklet as if he had been making calculations.

'You know what this Reich gold is worth, mein Herr? Working on today's gold quotations, and even allowing a ten-per cent discount . . .'

Devigne, who had been given time to think, interrupted him politely. 'I'm very sorry but I am unable to help you in this matter.'

Brett raised his eyebrows in well-feigned surprise. 'But I was instructed that you were the best person to contact.'

Devigne began leading Brett back into the shop. 'I wonder who told you that?'

'In our trade it is not usual to disclose names, Herr Devigne.'

'I realize that. However, the simple fact is we do not buy gold in bulk, whatever its source, Herr Graumann.'

'Von Graumann,' Brett reminded him.

Smiling his apologies, the old man pointedly opened the door of the shop. As he followed Brett out on the pavement, Furneau appeared at the entrance of the narrow alley that led to the yard. Seeing Brett, he stopped dead, then drew back a few paces as he watched the two men approach the Aston Martin. Opening the car door, Brett turned back to Devigne.

'I will contact you again, mein Herr. In twenty-four hours.'

The old man was polite but gave nothing away. 'You must do as you wish, monsieur, although I am afraid you will be wasting your time.'

'My father, the general, always said: "It is never a waste of time if some of the time has not been wasted".' Flashing a smile, Brett slid into the car. 'My father was a witty man,

nein? In twenty-four hours, then. Auf Weidersehen.'

Devigne stood watching the car vanish down the road. Unnoticed, the grim-faced Furneau turned and hurried back into the alley.

In the Judge's villa the two men were pursuing their own trains of thought with amusing results. Judge Fulton was seated at his desk with a pad and a local road map in front of him and a phone at his ear. Danny, restless and fretful, was holding forth aloud as he paced up and down the study.

'OK. So you're this girl. You see or hear something you're not supposed to. What do you do? You decide you want out ... and who can blame you?'

The Judge, talking into the telephone, sounded almost as if he were answering Danny's question. 'A large warehouse or a factory – some place that's been out of business until recently. Yes, of course I'll wait.'

Danny paused by the large desk. 'Yes, sir, that's what you'd do.' Oblivious that the Judge was merely pausing until the person on the line replied, Danny leaned over the desk. 'Now – someone doesn't like the idea so they try to stop you. Bang! A near miss ...'

He went pacing off across the room as Fulton's phone came back to life. The Judge nodded. 'Yes. Excellent. And who is the actual owner of the Société Anonyme?'

At the far side of the lounge Danny turned. 'Right. Now you're lying in hospital and you know you're still in great danger. Yet you clam up. Why?'

At the desk the Judge was showing excitement at what he was hearing. 'He does, does he? Could you locate the address for me?'

'So why don't you go to the cops?' Danny demanded. 'Why don't you spill everything?'

The Judge, who had hardly heard a word, frowned at him vaguely. 'I don't know.'

'Then I'll tell you,' Danny said triumphantly. 'Because you have an uncle you love who's in it up to his gold Napoleons.'

Fulton raised the receiver again and snatched up a pencil. 'Yes; I'm ready. Go on.'

The enthusiastic Danny ploughed on as the Judge scribbled an address on his pad. 'Now comes the twisteroo. Suddenly you've become too hot for them. They've gotta take the heat off. But how?'

'I'm most grateful,' the Judge said warmly. As he replaced the telephone Danny tapped him brightly on the shoulder.

'How do they take the heat off?'

The Judge smiled up at him. 'Tell me.'

'Easy. They turn it on to someone else. And while the fuzz is fuzzing around with Danny Wilde, they go stamping out gold Nappies up in the hills someplace. Maybe in a deserted stone quarry or in an old warehouse.'

'How about an abandoned foundry that's suddenly come to life?' the Judge asked.

'Yeah. That's the place. Now if we could only find where it is, I'd go and take a quiet look . . .'

The Judge calmly tore off the sheet of paper and handed it to Danny. 'Here's the address. It's in the Haute Province.'

'It is? Great! I'm on my way . . .'

Danny was almost at the door when reaction came. Halting in his tracks he stared at the piece of paper, then turned. A rather smug Fulton gave him an innocent smile.

'All you had to do was ask,' he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Making his way cautiously down the hillside, Danny paused behind a tree. The old foundry below him consisted of a large brick building and a scattered assortment of storage sheds. A white Mercedes and a stand containing two motor cycles and a few pedal cycles stood near the entrance. The entire compound stood two hundred years from the main road that twisted tortuously through the steep valley.

As Danny watched he saw a covered van bearing the inscription DEVIGNE ET CIE drive along the approach road and halt at the gates of the compound. A security guard emerged from his hut, talked a moment to the driver, and then waved the van through. A few seconds later two men began opening the two large doors of the foundry. Although Danny recognized neither man, they were Pullicino and Jacoby. A rumbling noise Danny had heard earlier rose by a full note as the doors were drawn back. Standing aside, the men helped the driver back the van into the foundry. The rumbling sound diminished as the men drew the doors closed behind them. Seeing the guard had returned to his hut, Danny scrambled down the last few yards of the hillside.

A newly-erected, chain-link-mesh fence surrounded the compound. Keeping back among the trees, Danny prowled round until he found a spot where a shed almost backed against it. Hidden by the shed he climbed the eight-foot high fence and stood balancing precariously as he reached for a drainage pipe that ran down the back of the shed. To his relief it took his weight and a moment later he was inside the compound.

He could see no workmen about and the white Mercedes stood between him and the guard hut. Yet it was a full thirty yards to the foundry with no cover on the way. Taking a deep breath, Danny ran.

He reached the side of the huge building without mishap. Hugging the wall he edged to the front corner and paused. Through a window in the distant guard hut he could see the man reading a magazine. Straightening, Danny walked round the front of the foundry as casually as if he were a workman.

The doors, which had a large 'No Entry' sign on them, were stoutly built with no cracks to peer through. With a quick glance at the compound entrance, Danny slipped round the other side of the building where he was out of sight of the guard. The ground here was an untidy jumble of empty packing cases, some stencilled with DEVIGNE

ET CIE and others carrying the names of foreign metal firms. Picking his way through them, Danny made for the only window in the long wall. Dust-grimed, it stood with its sill about six feet from the ground. Stout vertical bars offered burglar protection but Danny noticed the two centre bars were shaped to encircle a large vent-axia type of ventilator in the centre pane. The opaqueness of the window told the American that venetian blinds were drawn behind it to keep out the hot sun.

Careful to avoid noise, Danny set an empty packing case below the window. Using it as a stool he peered through the venetian slats into a small raised office. With its filing cabinet, desk, and large glass window in the far wall, it suggested a room built for an overseer who could do both office work and keep an eye on the workshop below. Through the opposite window Danny had a glimpse of a metal smelting furnace and the vague shapes of men moving around it.

Straightening up, Danny tried the bars and found them immovable. Turning his attention to the circular ventilator he tried, none too hopefully, to see if its outer rim would move. It would not but in making the effort he noticed the rim was attached by four screws. If the removal of the rim would detach the inside section of the ventilator, the opening that was left might be enough for a man to wriggle through.

Encouraged, Danny searched in his pockets for something to use as a screwdriver. Finding nothing he jumped down and rummaged among the crates. He straightened holding a piece of steel binding tape. Bending it double to make a rudimentary screwdriver, he clambered back on the crate and started work on the ventilator rim.

Inside the workshop the van driver, jacket underneath his arm, was making his way up the stairs to the foreman's office. Entering the office he crossed to a small washroom alongside it, failing to notice Danny's faint silhouette behind the venetian blinds. Hanging his jacket on the wall, the man turned on a tap and began washing grease from his hands.

Oblivious of the driver inside, Danny was now working on the last screw. Removing it and letting his homemade screwdriver fall, he gripped the outer rim of the ventilator and tried to turn it.

By this time the driver had finished washing his hands. Leaving the tap running he crossed the small washroom and began drying himself on a roller towel.

The ventilator rim was now showing signs of giving. Gripping it tightly Danny gave it a final wrench. To his horror it gave too easily and before he could grab it, the inside of the ventilator slipped and fell into the room. Danny's eyes closed but instead of the crash he expected there was only a sharp crack as the ventilator, prevented from falling by its flex, struck the window and hung dangling between it and the venetian slats.

Inside the washroom the driver turned off the tap, picked up his jacket, and crossed the foreman's office for the stairs. Danny, opening his eyes when the expected crash did not come, was about to reach through the circular opening and push the venetian blind aside when he caught a glimpse of the man. Expecting detection at any moment, he froze as the driver opened the door and descended the stairs.

Breathing again, Danny got a footing on the narrow sill of the window and began to ease his head and shoulders through the tight opening. Halfway through, with his head pushing the venetian blind away from the window, he paused, unhappily aware of his helplessness should he be seen. He began wriggling again and thirty seconds later tumbled in a heap on the floor.

Pausing a moment for breath, he crawled towards the inner window. Almost opposite him was the metal smelting furnace and its ancillary equipment. A glow from a window port told the American it was in operation. To his left, nearer the closed front door, was a wired-off enclosure with a large table and a weighing machine. Inside it two workmen in overalls were weighing and notating six large packing cases. Pullicino and Jacoby were standing alongside them. Although the two men were unknown to Danny, their well-

dressed appearance told him they were in charge of the operation. Between the enclosure and the far wall was a pile of empty crates and a hanging pulley and tackle. Between the enclosure and the front door was the van, clearly waiting to be loaded.

The sound of machinery clattering below the office made Danny wriggle forward for a better view. Almost at the foot of the stairs was a coin-stamping press. Two workmen were in attendance. One was operating the machine, the other was checking and stacking the finished coins. Two bins, lined with green baize, stood nearby. Both were almost filled with coins.

Contemplating his next move, Danny drew back and gazed round the office. His eyes fell on a clipboard lying on the desk. Half a minute later, operating on the premise that the more daring the deed the less likely the suspicion, Danny emerged into the open. Pencil in one ear and clipboard in hand, he descended the stairs as if it were something he did a hundred times a day.

He received a glance from the man stacking coins as he reached the workshop floor but as he walked nonchalantly past, the man turned back to the machine. The hairs on his neck bristling, Danny reached the two baize-lined baskets. Dipping into them, he pulled out a couple of coins and made imaginary notes on his clipboard. Then, appearing to drop the coins back but palming one instead, he moved across to the furnace and disappeared behind it.

Momentarily hidden from sight he examined the coin more closely and discovered it was a bronze replica of a Napoleon 100 franc piece. Looking puzzled, he dropped it in his pocket and climbed a metal ladder to a furnace inspection window. Through it he could see a seething, molten mass of orange metal but realized he had no way of telling whether the metal was gold or bronze.

Jumping down, he edged round the furnace until he could see the wired-off enclosure. Measuring the distance he waited until all the men had their backs to him. Then, taking a calculated risk, he ran on tip-toe towards the empty crates that lay between the enclosure and the wall.

From his new position he was near enough to hear the men talking in spite of the clatter of the coin-stamping press. Pullicino was standing alongside one of the workmen whose behaviour suggested he was the foreman. The second workman was weighing the last crate. He gave the weight to the foreman who wrote it down on a freight bill and handed it to Pullicino.

'That's the lot, sir. Six cases. The weights all exact.'

The Italian nodded and handed the bill back. 'Do you want us to load now?' the foreman asked as he thumb-tacked it to the crate.

Glancing at the six crates, Pullicino shook his head. 'Not until the morning. You can send the men home now. You and Jacoby can take care of the furnace.' His eyes shifted to the van driver who, chewing gum phlegmatically, was standing at the entrance of the enclosure. 'You'd better get back home too. I want you wide awake when we pull out in the morning.'

Nodding, the driver moved away. Across the foundry the clatter of machinery died as the remaining three workmen followed him. A bright apron of sunlight appeared as the front doors swung open. Motioning Jacoby and the foreman out of the wired-off enclosure, Pullicino closed the metal gate and locked them. He then joined the two men who were now standing alongside the van. Beyond them the driver and the three workmen could be seen walking towards the compound entrance.

With the sunlight helping to deepen the shadows around the crates, Danny was able to move right up to the enclosure. Squeezing an arm through the wire netting he managed to reach the freight bill of the nearest crate with his finger tips. As he tore the bill off, the sudden clang of a telephone made him stiffen. It sounded deafeningly close and as he twisted round he saw the telephone was fixed on a wall bracket right behind him.

Catching Pullicino's eye, Jacoby turned and made for the telephone. Pulling sharply back, Danny discovered to his horror that his sleeve was caught in the wire netting. As he

jerked desperately, there was the loud rending of cloth. But the clangour of the telephone drowned the sound and Danny was just able to roll out of sight behind a packing case before the ferrety Jacoby walked past him and picked up the receiver.

'Yes. What is it?' A pause and then: 'All right. I'll tell him.'

Hanging up the receiver, Jacoby glanced at Pullicino. 'It was the main gate. The guard says Devigne's car is coming up the approach road.'

The Italian's face hardened. Half a minute later a car pulled up with a squeal of brakes and the frail figure of Devigne appeared in the entrance. The old man looked excited as he half-ran towards the motionless Italian.

'What are you doing here?' Pullicino demanded.

'I've news for you, Pullicino. It might be something big. A man called Von Graumann came into the shop. He said he had got his hand on the Wansee gold – all the ingots that the Nazis hid!'

The Italian gave a start. 'What?'

'Think of it, Pullicino! It could mean a fortune.' In his excitement Devigne did not hear the second car that drew up outside or see the grim figure of Furneau closing up behind him. 'He just came into the shop and made me the proposition. If it's true, it could be a fortune. He said he would contact me in twenty-four hours.'

The old man's voice broke off with a gasp as Furneau grabbed his shoulder and spun him round. 'What were you doing with him, you old weasel? Tell me?'

Open-mouthed, Devigne stared at him. 'Who?'

'Brett Sinclair. Don't pretend you haven't seen him. I saw him drive away from your shop.'

Devigne was wide-eyed with fright as the powerful Furneau shook him. 'I don't know anyone called Sinclair. The man who came with this proposition was called Von Graumann.'

Furneau's grip tightened. 'I can imagine what the proposi-

tion was. Sinclair is Danny Wilde's friend. I know. I've checked him.'

Pullicino's voice was suddenly cold with menace as he took a step forward. 'Let him go.'

The terrified old man almost fell as Furneau released him. Ice cold, yet like a bomb about to explode, the Italian drew closer. 'What is in your mind, old man?'

From his hiding place Danny could hear the jeweller's terrified breathing. 'Nothing. I'm telling you that a man visited me – a man with a German accent – and he offered us a deal . . .'

'You betrayed us, old man. Didn't you?'

Seeing the Italian's expression, Devigne let out a scream. 'No. It's not true. I . . .'

Losing control, Pullicino slashed the old man viciously across the face. Flung backwards by the force of the blow the jeweller's head struck the metal fender of the van. With an exclamation Jacoby knelt over him. His shocked voice reached the equally shocked Danny.

'He's dead!'

Pullicino was quick to recover. 'In that case, so is our control over the girl.'

Jacoby's ferrety face stared up at him. 'You mean she must be killed too?'

'Is there any other way of keeping her quiet?' the Italian demanded. When Jacoby shook his head, Pullicino nodded at the foreman. 'You stay here, Bonel.' Jerking his head at Furneau and Jacoby, he led them towards the foundry entrance. 'We'll have to get to the hospital right away. When we get there, this is what I want you to do.'

Pausing with the two men at the workshop entrance to give them their instructions, the Italian was too far from Danny for his low voice to carry. Nor did the American attempt to overhear. His concern now was to reach the hospital before the three would-be assassins and yet with the foreman walking across to the coin-stamping press there appeared no way of escape. Edging back along the wall more in desperation than hope, he had almost reached the furnace

when his hand came in contact with a rusted metal bar. Turning sharply, he saw a side door half-hidden in the shadows. Locked by two rusted bolts as well as the iron bar, it appeared not to have been opened for years.

Danny gently lifted the iron bar and succeeded in working the two bolts free without drawing attention. His problem began when he tried to lever the door open. The hinges were badly rusted and the low groan that sounded was a warning of what was to follow. With an effort, he managed to get his fingers round the door jamb. Taking a deep breath, he gritted his teeth and heaved.

There was a groan, then a cacophany of ear-splitting screeches as the hinges gave. The door swung back six inches and then jammed. As a loud shout came from the workshop entrance Danny tried to squeeze through the gap and failed. Muttering beneath his breath, he grabbed the door jamb again.

Furneau, a pistol in his hand, appeared round the side of the van. The bullet he fired at Danny ricocheted from the heavy block-and-tackle that hung between the American and the wired-off enclosure. Furneau leapt over the empty crates and took aim again. Desperate, Danny ran forward and heaved the block at the gunman. It struck him waist-high and threw him half-stunned to the ground. As Danny ran back, Pullicino and Jacoby appeared alongside the van. Seeing Jacoby also had a pistol, Danny found the strength to drag the door open another couple of inches. As a shot rang out he squeezed through the gap and raced for the front of the workshop.

Inside, the Italian and his men wasted precious seconds trying to follow Danny through the jammed door. By the time they guessed his intentions and ran for the workshop entrance, he was waiting for them. His shove on the nearside heavy door sent it crashing into them and by the time they recovered the American had disappeared among the three cars that stood between the building and the main gates.

None of the cars contained an ignition key. With no time to waste Danny put his head down and sprinted for the

gates. The security guard, a stocky, middle-aged man, had heard the shots and drew a revolver as Danny approached. The American let out a yell. 'What're you standing there for? Didn't you see him go past?'

As the confused guard turned his head Danny felled him with a single punch. There was one motorcycle left in the stand and Danny leapt into the saddle and kick-started it. To his relief the engine fired at once. With his wheels hurling back dust, Danny went down the approach road like a speedway rider.

Behind him doors were slamming as Pullicino and his men leapt into the Mercedes. Engine revving, the huge car went after Danny like a released tiger. As Danny reached the main road and swung right, Furneau threw a reassuring glance at Pullicino who was seated alongside him. 'That old bike of Bonel's hasn't enough power. We'll soon catch him.'

The Italian saw he was right as soon as the Mercedes reached the main road and Furneau could put his foot down. The distance between the crouching Danny and the speeding car shortened as if snipped off by scissors. A hairpin appeared and Danny dry-skidded round it at a perilous angle. Yet when both machines were past it the distance between them was no more than thirty yards. Pullicino's voice was expressionless. 'Run him down!'

The gap closed to twenty yards, then to fifteen. Danny was throwing desperate glances over his shoulder. Seeing Jacoby lean from the rear window of the car with a pistol in his hand, he zig-zagged across the road. The action made him a difficult target but further reduced his lead.

A bend appeared ahead, with a grassy hillside on the right. As he roared into it, Danny's expression changed. Without warning he swung right and went bumping up the hillside like a scramble rider. Taken by surprise Furneau glanced at Pullicino. 'What shall I do?'

Realizing the futility of the chase the Italian sank back reluctantly into his seat. 'We can't waste any more time. Get to the hospital. We must silence the girl before she learns what has happened.'

Above them Danny had already disappeared over the brow of the hill. Below him, parked on a secondary road, was his red Ferrari which he had left there before reconnoitering the foundry. Bumping down the hillside, Danny jumped off the bike and took the Ferrari off in a flying start.

The secondary road joined the main road three miles along the valley. Knowing this and also aware he had lost ground on the Mercedes, Danny gave the Ferrari every ounce of power. Dust rose in clouds as the low-slung car snarled round the bends and ate up the straight stretches of road.

The Mercedes, driven by an expert driver, was also flying along the valley. A helicopter view of the two cars would have shown the Ferrari with only half-a-length lead as, unseen by one another, the drivers raced towards the road junction. As Danny burst out Furneau saw a streak of red closing in on him and instinctively braked. The Mercedes gave a violent swerve and when Furneau regained control, Danny was about fifteen yards in the lead.

As the American glanced back Pullicino recognized him. His shout of alarm alerted Jacoby who leaned from his window and tried a couple of shots. But Danny now had the bit in his teeth and although Furneau did his best to catch him, the Ferrari began to draw away.

CHAPTER SIX

The two leather-jacketed traffic policemen, sitting on their motor cycles in the clearing alongside the Moyenne Corniche, were chatting in a relaxed fashion. For once the traffic moving past them was behaving itself. Perhaps the hot day had been the reason, one policeman suggested. Perhaps it had taken the sting from the drivers . . .

The distant blast of a horn made both men turn sharply. Down the Corniche cars were bunching in towards the kerb

and a moment later the policemen saw why. A red Ferrari, horn blaring, was coming like a mad thing down the hill. Tyres howling, it went by the clearing so fast its air displacement rocked the men in their saddles. Exchanging startled glances the men pulled down their goggles and urged their motor cycles forward. With the Ferrari already a toy car in the distance they knew their chances of catching it were negligible but the attempt had to be made. As they kick-started their bikes another howling horn arrested them. Once again cars scattered like leaves as a huge white Mercedes went streaking past. The glance one policeman gave the other was wry. The sting gone? Perhaps the heat worked the other way and drove them mad! Throttles turning, engines roaring, the two men shot off on their vain chase.

With a squeal of tyres Danny drew up in the courtyard of the Hospital de la Madeleine. Running up the front steps he tried the door and found it locked. A sign alongside the door caught his attention: visiting hours were from 2.30 to 4.0 and it was past 5 o'clock. Searching frantically for the porter's bell Danny pressed it, his eyes watching the road. As he rang a second time the white Mercedes skidded round a corner and accelerated towards him. Showing his dismay, Danny jumped down the steps and ran round the side of the building.

The Mercedes drew right up behind the Ferrari. As his two henchmen jumped out, Pullicino checked them. 'Wait here! Watch his car.'

Drawing himself up to look like an anxious relative, the Italian made for the front entrance. A somewhat bad-tempered porter, answering Danny's call, opened the door as he reached it. 'Visiting hours are over,' he growled. 'Can't you read?'

Pullicino looked apologetic. 'I realize that. But this is a very urgent matter.'

'What do you mean – urgent?' the man asked suspiciously.

The Italian slipped a note into his hand. 'I must speak to someone in authority. Quickly.'

The man glanced down at the note, muttered something,

and withdrew. A moment later he came back with a ward sister. Pullicino, all charm and concern, won the woman's sympathy in seconds with his explanation. 'He has been having these fixations on and off ever since Michelle broke off their engagement,' he finished.

The sister was looking alarmed. 'You say this man is here now?'

'Yes, sister. We followed him.'

'But then shouldn't we call the police?'

'I don't think that is necessary – not now that we are here.' The Italian's eyes moved to the porter. 'The important thing is that you did not let him in.'

'No one's come through here,' the man said truculently. 'Visiting hours finish at four and . . .'

'Yes, of course,' Pullicino murmured, turning his charm back on the ingratiated sister. 'Do you think that in the circumstances you could stretch your rules a little, sister? I would like to be sure Michelle is quite safe before I leave.'

'But of course, monsieur. Please come this way.'

The Italian followed the woman down the hall. 'And you agree it is better not to upset Michelle by mentioning this unfortunate affair?'

His concern for the girl won him an appreciative smile. 'Yes, I do, monsieur. You can rely on my discretion.'

The small ward was quiet, its silence broken only by the muffled sound of traffic and the occasional clank of a trolley being wheeled down the corridor outside. Sitting up in bed, Michelle was putting the final touches to a watercolour. Both her side table and the wheel-table over her bed were littered with painting materials. As she sat back to study her handiwork, a sharp tap on the window made her start and turn.

Danny, crouched on the fire escape, was making frantic signals for her not to cry out. The girl's mouth half-opened, then she changed her mind and released the window catch. Danny climbed into the ward thankfully.

'Get your things! Quickly! A dressing gown, anything.'

She stared at him. 'What for?'

Danny ran to her cupboard, rammed clothes into a small suitcase, and threw a dressing gown over her. 'They're here! The gang your uncle was involved with.' When she continued to stare at him Danny decided shock tactics were necessary. 'They've just killed your uncle. They know the police will ask you questions, so they have to silence you too. Come on!'

Numbed by the news, the girl offered no resistance as Danny pushed her out on the fire escape. They had not been gone thirty seconds before the sister entered the ward, followed by Pullicino. The Italian's smile died on seeing the empty bed. Pushing the sister roughly aside he ran to the open window. His shout reached the two men waiting alongside Danny's car.

'Furneau! The fire escape!'

From their position in the front courtyard neither man knew which side of the hospital carried the escape stairs. For a moment they stared at one another, then Furneau, galvanized into life, pushed Jacoby to the left while he ran round to the right. Danny, who had reached the foot of the fire escape, saw him coming and drew the girl into a doorway. As Furneau came pounding up, the American launched himself forward and drove his head into the man's stomach. The winded Furneau went sprawling over a low wall into a flower bed. Grabbing the suitcase in one hand and Michelle's arm in the other, Danny pulled the girl towards the courtyard. They reached it just as Jacoby, who had found no fire escape on his side of the hospital, came running back to help Furneau. Catching sight of Danny he stopped dead and snatched inside his jacket. Danny pushed the girl towards his car and launched himself at the ferrety Jacoby in the same movement.

'The red car,' he yelled. 'Start her up!'

His shoulder struck Jacoby just as the man was dragging out a pistol. He followed it with a punch that dropped him in an unconscious heap. Behind him there was a throaty roar as the Ferrari's engine fired. As Michelle opened the

driver's door, Danny threw in the suitcase and tumbled in beside her. 'Good girl,' he panted, grabbing the wheel.

The car leapt forward just as Pullicino ran out of the hospital entrance. With his two men still dazed from their rough treatment, the Italian could do nothing but watch as the Ferrari accelerated down the road and disappeared.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The angry squawks that came from the telephone made Judge Fulton wince and hold the receiver away from his ear. When they ceased to allow the speaker to take breath, the Judge jumped in quickly.

'Are you positive, Commandant? There could be no mistake . . .?'

The squawking began again, louder than ever. Fulton's eyes rose to Danny who was pacing restlessly up and down in front of his desk. As the tinny voice rose to a crescendo, the Judge nodded compliantly. 'Yes, Commandant. I will tell him immediately. My apologies for all the trouble you have been caused.'

As he hastily dropped the receiver back on its cradle, Danny gave him an indignant stare. 'Apologies! Are you kidding? The guy should be thanking you!'

Brett entered the room and approached the two men. 'Any luck?'

Fulton grimaced and shook his head. 'All bad, I'm afraid. It appears our chickens flew the coop. The police found no body, no van, no packing cases and no coins.' His gaze shifted to Danny. 'I hope your car is well hidden.'

For a moment Danny mistook his meaning. 'It's in the shrubbery. Those hoods won't spot it even if they come here.' Then he gave a start. 'Why?'

The Judge rocked back in his chair. 'Because the Commandant is sending a police escort here to make certain the

American trouble-maker takes the next plane out. To anywhere.'

Danny's indignation almost choked him. 'But it all happened! Just as I told you.'

Fulton gave a sigh. 'I believe you, Danny. I know this man Pullicino – I've been wanting to see him put away for years. But I can't nail him without positive proof.'

'What about the shipping manifest?' Danny asked.

Brett picked up the label from the desk. 'Six crates, bronze coins, destination Genoa. . . . It's all perfectly legitimate.'

'Wasn't there anything else that would incriminate them?' Fulton appealed.

Danny shook his head in disgust. 'You've had a dead body and packing cases loaded with fake coins. What more do you want?' Then he gave a start and fishing in his pocket pulled out a coin which he slapped triumphantly on the Judge's desk. 'What about this? I lifted it from a bin near the coin-press.'

Fulton snatched it up, only to let out a sigh a moment later. 'It's exactly what their manifest states. A bronze replica of the Napoleon piece. It supports rather than demolishes their case.'

As Danny's face fell, Michelle's voice made all three men turn. Looking pale and drawn from her uncle's death she approached the desk. 'There are others – in gold. I've seen them.'

Fulton leaned eagerly forward. 'When?'

'One day when I went uninvited to the foundry. None of Pullicino's gang were there – that's why I didn't know about them. But I saw the gold coins.'

'They were made from the Napoleon moulds you designed for your uncle?'

The girl flushed. 'Yes. That was why I ran away. I wanted no part in the fraud. But someone must have found out and tried to shoot me at the airport. Instead it is my uncle they've killed.'

Fulton was frowning. 'The trouble is, my dear, we don't possess a scrap of evidence to show the police they are doing

anything illegal. And we don't know where to find any.'

'Wait a second.' The interruption came from Brett. 'Danny, were those six crates almost packed when you came on the scene?'

'Yeah. They were just filling in the top layer.'

Brett swung round on the Judge. 'Then isn't it possible they've sandwiched the gold coins between layers of bronze ones?'

Fulton frowned again. 'It's possible, but possible isn't a legal term. If we were to stop them and find nothing, we'd be in serious trouble.'

Danny, looking animated again, grinned at Brett and drew out his car keys. Brett held up a restraining hand. 'Hold it. They've got at least half-an-hour's start. So before you go off at half-cock again. . .'

'What do you mean – again?' Danny demanded.

Brett took a road map from the Judge and spread it on the desk. 'You're overlooking the fact they have two routes to the Italian border – the Autoroute and the Grande Corniche.'

'So what? We've got two cars. So let's move it.'

Michelle took Danny's arm. 'I'm coming with you.'

Danny backed away. 'Oh, no. This could be rough. You stay here with the Judge until we get back.'

The buzz of the door bell made all three men freeze. The Judge hurried over to the french windows. His voice was hushed as he glanced back. 'It's the Gendarmerie. Danny's escort to the plane.'

Michelle's eyes were on the American. 'If you won't let me come, I'll scream.'

Danny gave Brett a look of dismay. 'She wouldn't?'

The girl drew in a deep breath. Brett winced as he watched her. 'She would. Take her!'

As the door buzzer sounded again, Fulton went to the study door and paused. 'Actually, it isn't a bad idea. If you are stopped, she could corroborate your story.' His tone changed as the buzzing became impatient. 'As soon as they enter the hall, leave by the french windows. Don't forget to

pick up your two-way radio and your passports. I'll hold the fort until you're on your way. Good luck.'

Danny gave a grunt of disgust as the Judge disappeared into the hall. 'He's done it again.'

'What?' Brett asked, peering through the window.

'Made me feel guilty that I'm taking the easier assignment,' the American muttered.

The red Ferrari came out of the Corniche tunnel near Eze like a live rocket and went snaking down the twisting road that ran by the ruined castle. Alongside Danny, Michelle was holding a walkie-talkie set in a way that allowed Danny to talk into it while keeping both hands on the wheel. The aerial of the radio protruded through an open window. Danny, who was wearing dark glasses and a beret as a gesture towards disguise, leaned towards the microphone.

'Calling Mayfair! Do you read me, Mayfair? Over.'

Running at high speed along the autoroute between Nice and Menton, Brett had his walkie-talkie hung on a dashboard button.

'Yes, Daniel. I read you.'

'See any good trucks lately?'

'Not yet. Where are you?'

'We've just passed through Eze.'

'Eze! You're over three miles behind me. You'd better let Michelle drive.'

'Oh, funny, funny. Listen – you want to try taking these curves.'

'You talking about Michelle or the road? Over and out.'

Michelle was smiling as Danny clicked off the set. He settled behind the wheel and the engine note of the Ferrari rose a full octave. He met the girl's glance defiantly. 'We can't let him reach the frontier first. It'll do terrible things to his ego.'

The Ferrari was sweeping down the lower Corniche towards the coast road when the walkie-talkie crackled again. 'Calling Daniel . . . Are you still with me?'

Michelle quickly positioned the set for Danny. 'Yes, your Highness. Do you see the truck?'

'No. But do you remember that dirty white Mercedes that spilt your lemonade?'

Danny gave a start. 'What about it?'

'It's right behind me,' Brett told him. 'It's been tailing me for the last few miles.'

Half a mile ahead Brett could see the French customs check point stretching across the road. Camions and vans were nose to tail in the inner lane, cars lined up in the outer. Douaniers and police were milling around the vehicles, examining passports and checking contents. As the Aston Martin approached, a policeman waved Brett into the lane alongside the camions. As he halted he heard the firing of engines as the camions, whose queue was shorter than that of the cars, moved forward. The foremost camion had just been cleared by the customs and was pulling away. As it swung into the middle lane Brett gave a start as he glimpsed the inscription along its side, DEVIGNE ET CIE. He clicked on his walkie-talkie again.

'Bronx, wake up! I'm stuck between the border Gendarmerie and that white Mercedes. How about you?'

The radio crackled cheerfully. 'We're clear and ready to run into sunny Italy. Any sign of the truck?'

'That's why I'm calling. It's just passed through the customs. You'd better get up on my road and keep tabs on it.'

Danny snapped alert. 'Coming up the first slip road. When you're clear, come running.'

Satisfied, Brett adjusted his rear view mirror to watch the Mercedes. It was positioned two cars behind him and a door had opened to allow Jacoby out. Reaching inside his coat to adjust his shoulder holster, the man began walking casually towards Brett's car.

Motionless, Brett waited for him. The small queue of camions was now almost cleared and only one was left at the barrier. A few seconds later a policeman waved it through and the lane was clear.

Brett glanced back at his rear mirror. Jacoby, still looking

casual, had almost reached the Aston-Martin. Brett waited until the man was about to drag open the driver's door and then, with split-second timing, revved the engine and swung over the wheel. The Aston-Martin leapt forward and swerved into the camion lane, making the startled Jacoby jump for his life. As the man ran back towards the Mercedes, Brett pulled up calmly at the camion barrier and held his passport and papers out for inspection. The customs officer who ran up waved them away and tried to explain in French that Brett was in the wrong lane. In return he received a bright smile.

'I don't suppose you'd believe me if I said that camion you just passed through might be carrying two million dollars in gold?'

The comment went right over the douanier's head. 'I am sorry, monsieur, but you must use the other barrier.'

Brett waved him nearer. 'All right, now I'll tell you the truth. My grandmother is one hundred years old today. Vous comprenez, ma vieille grand'mère a cent ans . . . She feels like a bit of Dolce Vita before it's too late, so today she's flying to Rome. Now, if I'm not there to meet her plane in . . .'

The Frenchman showed immediate sympathy. 'Votre grand'mère? Ah oui, je comprends!' Conspiratorially, he pushed Brett's papers back into the car. 'It is not necessary, monsieur. Allez! Allez vite! Cents ans,' he murmured as he raised the barrier. 'C'est magnifique!'

'C'est drole, aussi,' Brett grinned as he accelerated towards the Italian frontier post. Behind him a camion drew up against the closed barrier, thwarting Furneau who was about to make the same move as Brett. Beside him Pullicino pounded a fist into his hand in frustrated rage.

While Brett was building up speed on the autoroute, Michelle had spotted the slip road and directed Danny into it. As they approached the higher road which had now turned into a dual carriageway, Michelle gave a squeal of excitement.

'There it is! Coming up behind us!'

Turning his head, Danny saw a familiar van with the inscription DEVIGNE ET CIE coming at speed along the carriageway. 'Timing,' he grinned. 'Fasten your safety belt.'

Before the girl realized his intention, he drove across the road right in the path of the speeding lorry. As the girl gave a gasp of shock and closed her eyes, there was a loud hiss of air brakes and an alarmed blast from the camion's horn. Straightening the car, Danny pretended to accelerate, then braked hard again. Glancing back Michelle caught a glimpse of the camion driver and his mate. Face thunderblack, they were shaking their fists and yelling.

As both vehicles started forward again, the camion tried to pass the Ferrari on the inside. Anticipating the move Danny waited a moment and then swung the wheel to the right. Caught by surprise the camion halted with its nose against the grass verge. Half a second later both cab doors were flung open and the driver and his companion leapt out. Big, capable, and mean-looking, their intentions were signal clear.

Danny and Michelle scrambled out of the car. The girl, clutching her handbag like a weapon, backed on to the grass verge. Danny, awaiting the onslaught of the two heavies, gave her a strained grin. 'When his lordship arrives, direct him this way.'

His breath was driven out with a whoosh as the driver grabbed him and slammed him against the car. For an instant Danny's expression was pained. 'I was just telling the young lady—don't you know it's illegal to drive nose to tail that way?'

As the man stared at him, Danny drove a fist into his stomach and the fight was on. The driver doubled up but his companion came pounding in like an express train. Seeing Danny taking punches from all sides, Michelle ran forward and swung her handbag wildly. Seeing it coming for his face, the surprised Danny ducked and collected a rabbit-punch that sent him down glassy-eyed. Exchanging glances, the two men turned on the frightened girl. As she backed away and came up against a hedge, there was a sharp scream

of tyres and Brett's Aston-Martin swung in behind the camion. As he leapt out and dragged one man from Michelle Danny climbed to his feet. He was breathing hard but his expression was one of unholy expectancy. 'I thought you might pull one of those late aristocratic entrances. The big one's mine!'

The fight that followed was hard but quickly over. As Danny dragged the two unconscious heavies to the grass verge, Brett pulled a large tyre lever from the boot of his car and leapt into the back of the camion. 'Back to the French customs,' he shouted at Danny. 'Fast!'

Aware that the Mercedes would be on them at any moment, Michelle ran round the cab and jumped in beside Danny. Under full lock the camion swung across the road, bumped over the central partition, and ignoring the horn blasts from indignant motorists, began gathering speed back to the frontier.

Inside the camion Brett had opened a crate and was examining the layers of coins. Looking anything but pleased he picked up the tyre lever and turned to a second crate. In the cab Danny was looking thoughtful as reaction set in. 'You know, if we're wrong about this smuggling racket, we're in a heap of trouble.'

Michelle's glance condemned his doubts. 'I'm certain those coins are gold.'

'But just in case,' Danny argued. 'What's the food like in Italian jails?'

The girl caught his mood and smiled. 'I prefer French cooking.'

Danny nodded pensively. 'Yeah. But don't they still use the guillotine?'

His banter ceased as he caught sight of the white Mercedes, approaching them at breakneck speed, on the opposite carriageway.

Pullicino saw the camion at almost the same instant and twisted round as the two vehicles flashed past one another. His hand grabbed Furneau's arm. 'Get after them!'

Furneau braked hard, then swung the wheel over. Tyres

screaming, the Mercedes slewed round over the central position, narrowly missing an on-coming car. As its alarmed driver gave an indignant blast of his horn, Pullicino pointed at the receding camion. 'Catch them! Before they reach the frontier!'

The huge Mercedes picked up speed rapidly. In the rear seat Jacoby drew his automatic and lowered the window. Ahead, Danny had his foot right down on the floorboards but could see the Mercedes relentlessly closing the gap. The American tried to warn Brett. 'Behind you. Bandits coming up fast at six o'clock!'

The Mercedes was now within pistol range. Leaning his head from the window, Jacoby took careful aim and fired. As Brett drove his tyre lever into yet another crate, a bullet ricocheted from a metal stanchion. He banged on the rear of the cab. 'Will you do something about that flak?'

Danny swung the wheel right and then left. Cars scattered in all directions as the camion snaked across the road. Sweating, Brett tore loose the lid of the third crate. Digging out a roll of coins he tried to inspect them as the van lurched from side to side.

Clinging to her seat Michelle let out a cry of relief as the screeching camion rounded a bend. 'There's the frontier!'

Four hundred yards ahead a cluster of offices and road barriers denoted the Italian customs post. Seeing one check-out empty Danny aimed the van at it and stood hard on the accelerator. Startled officials waved frantically and Michelle closed her eyes as the camion hurtled towards the lowered barrier. Hurling the pole away like a matchstick, the camion tore on towards the French checkpoints. Before the astonished Italians could recover, the white Mercedes burst through the gap in pursuit.

Ahead, the unsuspecting French customs were preparing to receive the camion. One barrier was raised and as Danny headed towards it Michelle leaned from the cab window and shouted. 'Attention! Venez! Venez!'

Policemen and douaniers scattered as Danny thundered

through the barrier and skidded to a halt. By this time the post had been alerted by a phone call from the Italian customs and a squad of policemen poured from an office and ran towards the van. As they approached Brett drew aside the canvas cover and jumped down. He gave the officer leading the squad a bright smile.

'I'll bet you all thought we'd never stop!'

Bristling with indignation, the officer, a small dapper man, waved a revolver at him. 'Where is the driver?'

Danny appeared round the side of the camion, followed by Michelle. Brett turned to him uneasily. 'Danny, before you say anything, there's something you should know.'

Danny struggled impatiently as two policemen grabbed him. 'Lay off, will you? I've been shot at, I've had cars aimed at me, and now this truck's been used as target practice. Doesn't that give me a right to say something?'

The police chief motioned for the men to release his arms. Down the road there was a squeal of brakes as the persuing Mercedes crash-braked. As Pullicino and his men jumped out and ran towards the camion, the Italian gave a shout. 'Arrest them ! They are hijackers.'

The police officer stared suspiciously at Danny. 'Who owns this camion?'

Danny jabbed a finger at the breathless Pullicino who was trying to push his way through the police cordon. 'He does. And the cargo is his too.'

Brett winced. 'Danny, watch it . . .'

Ignoring him, Danny plunged on. 'And these are the three guys who've been shooting at us on the autoroute.'

'What does the fool expect us to do,' Pullicino demanded as the police chief motioned him forward. 'I have the right to protect my cargo and they were stealing it. I demand all three of them are placed under arrest.'

The officer, a testy man who took badly to orders from civilians at any time, bristled immediately at the Italian's tone. 'In this country no one uses firearms without police permission, monsieur. And no one demands my obedience. I shall make my arrests in my own good time.'

At the back of the group Brett had silently lowered the back of the camion and was showing Michelle some of the coins he had taken from the crates. Looking shocked, she climbed into the van and picked up a few more that had scattered over the floor during the wild chase. Her look of dismay deepened as Danny, sure of his case and heartened by the officer's tone, pointed at the Italian.

'Right. You tell him. You know who this guy is? Pullicino – that's who he is – and I'll tell you his racket. He smuggles gold. Millions of dollars worth of it.'

The Italian's expression changed from anger to contempt. 'Gold! Millions of dollars? I thought it was a criminal who stole my camion and now it appears it might be an imbecile. Perhaps you should take him to hospital rather than prison.'

Danny pushed belligerently forward. 'I'm telling you those crates in there are full of gold.'

Pullicino's amused eyes remained on the police chief. 'They are full of bronze replicas of Napoleonic coins. Valuable, of course, or why would these three steal them? But not gold.' His tone turned belligerent again. 'Why are we wasting time? This man has admitted the camion and the coins are mine.'

'Gold coins,' Danny insisted. He swung round. 'Brett baby, show them.'

Brett sighed and tossed a coin at him. 'Bronze.'

'Gold,' Danny said triumphantly. Then, as Brett's words registered, he gazed in dismay at the coin in his hand. Pushing past the police he grabbed another coin from Brett. From the conversation that followed he and the Englishman might have been the only two present.

'Bronze,' Brett said gloomily.

'What's with you? They're gold. They must be.'

'They're not. They're all bronze.'

Coins in hand, Danny stared down at them. Sighing again, Brett patted Michelle's hand and moved towards the group of police. 'Gentlemen, perhaps you will allow me one call to my attorney before you place us in your local iron hotel.'

There was no response. Another altercation had broken out between Pullicino and the police officer and it was holding the attention of the delighted gendarmerie. As Brett tried to draw their attention, there was a sudden yelp from Danny. 'Wait a minute. Wait!'

Brett turned patiently. 'Danny, the test of a gentleman is to accept the vagaries of fate with dignity.'

Danny was excitedly hefting the two coins. He held them out to Brett. 'Try them.'

Brett weighed them and held one up. 'This one's heavier.'

'Right. And gold's heavier than bronze, isn't it?'

The two men suddenly grinned at one another. Snatching the coins, Danny began scratching the heavier one with the lighter. There was a gleam of gold as varnish peeled away. Exchanging conspiratory glances, the two men moved towards Pullicino and the bristling police officer. The Italian was putting on a convincing show of anger.

'These men are thieves of the worst kind and I demand that you arrest them.'

'Please don't tell me what to do, monsieur.'

'Someone must tell you if you take no action. I am running out of patience.'

'So am I, monsieur, if you retain this attitude.'

'I'll have your job if you don't put them under arrest immediately.'

The bantam-like officer was almost dancing with rage. 'Don't threaten me, monsieur. I warn you – don't threaten me!'

Winking at Brett, Danny pulled on the officer's sleeve. 'Excuse me.'

The man ignored him as Pullicino came back aggressively. 'If you performed your function as a commandant properly there would be no need for threats. I demand that you arrest them.'

Brett tried next. 'Excuse us, but . . .'

'Demand,' the officer stormed. 'How dare you demand? I am in authority here and I give the orders . . .' Suddenly noticing the glints of gold in the coin Danny was offering

him, he grabbed it as Pullicino waved a belligerent arm at the camion.

'Any fool can see I have a legitimate shipment of coins here . . .'

As both Brett and Danny nodded, the officer beamed with unholy joy. 'Gold!' Throwing up an histrionic arm he pointed at the startled Pullicino and his men. 'Arrest them!'

As the police dragged the struggling men away a messenger ran from a customs office and handed the chief a piece of paper. He read it and then glanced at Danny and Brett. 'Which of you is Lord Brett Sinclair?'

Danny, overjoyed at the outcome of the affair, gave a grin. 'I am.'

Brett gave him a cold stare. 'Sir, if you believe that, you'd believe anything. Who's the message from?'

The officer handed Brett the memo. 'Someone called Judge Fulton.'

'Phone him back and tell him we don't need him,' Danny suggested.

The officer smiled as he turned away. 'It seems it is he who needs you, monsieur.'

Brett lifted his eyes from the paper. 'He's right. Our good judge has been arrested.'

Danny nearly choked. 'What?'

'Apparently it's for obstructing the police in the performance of their duty.'

Danny's look of concern was almost diabolical. 'How do you like that? And such a nice man too.'

'I suppose we should bail him out,' Brett ruminated.

Danny held up a warning hand. 'Remember what he always tells us. Never act impulsively. Why don't we discuss it with Michelle over dinner tonight?'

Brett winked at the smiling Michelle. 'I know it's hard to believe but he does get a good idea once in a while. Let's do as he says and make his day.'

GREENSLEEVES

Based on the screenplay by
Terence Feely

CHAPTER ONE

The red Ferrari turned from the quiet country road into the gravel carriageway and halted. A pair of fine wrought-iron gates, hung between two imposing pillars, were closed before it. The driver climbed from the car and approached them. A dark-haired, nuggety man, he was wearing sun glasses and carried a camera and a guide book. His air as he stared at the gates suggested a tourist who had come across an English architectural treasure and was anxious to make the most of the opportunity.

A large nameplate with an engraved crest bore the inscription GREENSLEEVES. Beyond the gates the winding carriageway was flanked by azaleas and rhododendrons. The manor house itself was hidden by the dense bushes and trees, but a small lodge was snuggled picturesquely at one side of the drive. Searching for a bell, the visitor found one on a stone pillar and pressed it.

A few seconds later a man appeared in the doorway of the lodge. Heavily built, in his early forties, he wore an almost truculent expression as he approached the gates.

'What do you want?'

The visitor, whose accent was American, was exceedingly polite. 'Hi. This is Greensleeves, isn't it?'

'Yes. Why?'

'I've been reading about it in the guide books. I'd sure like a look round if you can arrange it.'

There was almost suspicion in the stare he received. 'It's not open to tourists.'

'I wouldn't be any trouble. I'd just walk round and take a few pictures.'

'Not a chance. This is a private residence and the owner doesn't like strangers.'

The American indicated his camera pleadingly. 'This is my first trip over. Just a couple of pictures . . .'

'How many times do you want telling? Now I'd be glad if you'd move your car off the drive.'

The American sighed and retreated to the Ferrari. Behind the gates the lodgekeeper watched him suspiciously. The American started the engine and then, as if from an afterthought, leaned his head from the car window. 'By the way – who's the owner?'

'Doesn't your guide book tell you? The fifteenth earl – Lord Brett Sinclair.'

The American nodded his thanks and turned the car down the country road. The lodgekeeper did not turn away until it disappeared.

The Ferrari nosed quietly round the bend and drew in under the high wall of the manor. A tall man, elegantly dressed, emerged from behind a bush. 'Well?' he asked.

Danny Wilde, the American 'tourist', nodded. 'You were right. I couldn't get past the gate.'

The tall man glanced at the moss-covered wall. 'Then we'll just have to do it the hard way.'

Danny followed him to the wall and coupled his hands to form a step. The tall man jumped up, straddled the wall, and reached down. A moment later both men were standing inside the wall. As the tall man started forward, Danny caught his arm.

'Just one thing, because I'm interested. Why are you breaking into your own property?'

Brett Sinclair, fifteenth earl, gave him a quizzical grin. 'All in good time, Daniel. All in good time.'

He led Danny through a maze of azaleas and rhododen-

drons and pointed to a coppice ahead. 'The house is just beyond those trees.'

Danny's hushed voice was a cross between caution and exasperation. 'So what? Why all this hokey cloak and dagger stuff?'

A movement among the trees caught Brett's attention and he drew Danny behind a bush. The two men watched a gamekeeper, a shotgun over his arm, emerge from the trees and move across their line of vision. Brett kept his voice low. 'Something happened last week. Not much in itself but enough to make me want to see the old place again.'

They waited until the gamekeeper had vanished and then ran for cover in the coppice. As they crept forward to gain a glimpse of the house, Brett turned to Danny again. 'It must be six or seven years since I was last here. An old butler acts as caretaker and runs the place.'

'So?' Danny enquired.

Brett shrugged. 'The house has been terribly neglected. Not even a lick of paint. In fact it's practically derelict.'

Ahead, Danny had drawn aside a branch. His reproachful exclamation made Brett hurry alongside him. 'What are you trying to do? Spook me?'

Brett followed his eyes. At the far side of a graceful stretch of parkland, the Tudor manor of Greensleeves stood tranquil in the evening sunlight. Classical in its style and elegance, it looked in a perfect state of preservation. Two opulent cars stood on the large forecourt beneath its terrace. As the two men stared, a glossy hunter ridden by a beautiful girl trotted from a clump of trees and vanished into the stables.

'I'll settle for that kind of ruin,' Danny said, eyeing Brett suspiciously.

The Englishman looked bewildered. 'I don't believe it. It must have cost thousands to put it in that condition.'

'So it costs thousands. You can afford it.'

'You're missing the point – as usual. I haven't spent a penny on it.'

Danny blinked. 'You've got to be kidding.'

'I'm telling you the truth. Not a penny.'

'Then let's find out who has,' Danny said, starting forward.

Brett grabbed his arm. 'At times like this I always remember the old family motto – "Consilio et Prudentia".'

'What's that mean?'

'Sneaky is best!'

'That fits,' Danny grinned. 'So where do we go now?'

Making certain they were unseen, Brett led him back to the estate wall. 'We're going for a drink. In a very old English pub not far away.'

The evening sunlight slanting through the mullioned windows of the Jane Seymour inn gave a gleam to its copperware and a patina to its oak beams. At that early hour the bar was quiet, with only two farmhands yarning in an alcove near the window. As Brett closed the door and led Danny forward, one of the locals recognized him. The respectful nod he gave was only a step from a tugging of the forelock.

The elderly balding innkeeper had his back to the door as he replaced bottles on the bar shelves. His reflection in the mirror showed him to be a Dickensian character whose cheeks sported tufts of white hair. Winking at Danny, Brett leaned over the counter.

'Good evening, Ward.'

The man gave a start and turned. His welcome as he recognized Brett was both hearty and respectful. 'Lord Sinclair! My word, sir, this is a pleasure. A real pleasure!'

'Thank you, Ward,' Brett smiled. He motioned at Danny. 'This is a friend of mine. Danny Wilde – Gregory Ward.'

Danny's greeting faded as the hearty old man leaned over the counter and seized his hand. 'A pleasure, sir, I'm sure.'

As Danny staggered back, nursing his crushed fingers, Ward beamed at the two men. 'Well, well well . . . It's many a long day since there was a Sinclair in this bar. Mind you, we don't see much of the Dascoignes neither – nor the Sinclair Dascoignes or the Dascoigne Sinclairs.'

At Danny's bewildered look, Brett grinned. 'The Somerset Sinclairs always married Dascoignes.'

'You don't say. Didn't that tend to get complicated?'

'Sometimes. I've got a cousin whose younger brother is also his grandfather.'

As Danny shuddered the old man put two enormous mugs on the counter. 'Now, what will you be having, gentlemen? A pint of cider apiece – as strong as ever?'

Brett glanced at Danny. 'Yes, that would be splendid. Danny?'

The American hesitated. 'Yeah. I could have . . .'

'Marvelous stuff,' Brett broke in. 'They put a dead rat in every barrel to give it body.'

Danny blanched. 'Make mine a Scotch. A double.'

The beaming innkeeper turned away, chatting as he poured the drinks. 'Course, we all guessed you'd be coming back soon, milord, when we heard you were doing Greensleeves up in such a hurry.'

Brett exchanged glances with Danny. 'Yes. It's come along very well, hasn't it?'

Ward drew a pint of cider, pushed it towards Brett and turned back for Danny's whisky. 'First we knew of it was when your old butler, Moorland, came dashin' in the news. Like a dog with two tails, he was. Drank twelve pints of cider to celebrate.'

Danny gave a start. 'Twelve pints! Could he walk?'

The old man beamed as he handed Danny his whisky. 'Hard to say, sir. He was unconscious at the time.' He turned to Brett. 'My word, sir. Wait until the rest of the village knows you're here . . .'

Brett motioned him closer. 'Ward.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'm *not* here. Understood.'

The old man did not bat an eyelid. 'Right, milord.' He nodded at the two locals in the alcove. 'Leave it to me. I'll pass the word.'

'Good man. There's just one more thing.'

'Yes, milord.'

'After closing time we'll want to use the trap door.'

The innkeeper gave a fat and knowing chuckle. 'It's been a long time since that was used, milord. It'll be just like the old days. I tell you, sir, it does my old heart good to know Greensleeves is alive again.'

Danny nudged Brett's elbow. 'What's with this trapdoor? We're going in for smuggling or something?'

He received Brett's most enigmatic smile. 'If you show patience, my impetuous friend, many wonders shall be shown you.'

CHAPTER TWO

The library at Greensleeves was an elegant room with discreet lighting, panelled walls and rows of leather-bound books. Of all the rooms in the great Tudor house it symbolized most a way of life and the man seated at its solid oak desk in no way looked out of place in his surroundings.

A desk lamp showed him to be in his early forties. Wearing a silk scarf and a smoking jacket, he was an urbane figure, slimly built and yet in the peak of condition. A smoking cigar lay on an ashtray beside him as he read the contents of a large file. As a clock struck he glanced at his watch and closed the file. Picking up his cigar he emitted a contented cloud of smoke before switching off the desk lamp and crossing to the library door.

The hall he entered was distinguished by suits of armour and a large collection of ancient weapons secured in racks on the panelled walls. As he crossed the floor a man appeared from the shadows beneath the huge staircase. His husky build suggested a man used to physical work rather than service; at the same time his bearing as a manservant was convincing.

He received an urbane nod. 'I'm retiring now, Jackson. You can lock up.'

Jackson moved forward. 'Very good, Mr Urquart.'

A large cat followed the manservant forward. It ran across the hall and jumped into a leather chair where it began washing itself. Urquart smiled. 'Is she hoping to catch another mouse in here tonight?'

'I expect so, sir.'

'I wish her luck,' Urquart yawned and made towards the staircase. 'Good night, Jackson.'

'Good night, sir.'

As Urquart ascended the staircase, the manservant crossed to the front door and drew two heavy bolts across it. He tried the catches of the three windows, switched off the hall light, and retired to his quarters beneath the staircase. A moment later the only sound in the hall was the ticking of a grandfather clock. Moonlight, flooding through the windows, gave the huge hall an eerie appearance.

In the armchair the cat was still washing when a sudden creak made its head rise. Leaping from the chair it ran to the closed library door. The creak came again, followed by whispering voices. The cat scratched against the door and gave a frustrated mieow.

The beaming Gregory Ward stood at the door of his pub and wished his guests good night. As the last man disappeared, he closed the door and turned the huge lock. He then hurried to the back of the bar.

'Are you ready, your Lordship?'

Brett and Danny appeared in a rear doorway. Both were carrying torches. Brett glanced at Danny who was looking somewhat apprehensive. 'Yes; we're ready. Come on, Daniel.'

Ward led them to a wide settle that stood beneath the window. Selecting a key, he unlocked a padlock and lifted the heavy lid. As Danny watched in fascination Brett stepped into the settle, to vanish from sight a moment later. With some alarm Danny moved forward to peer into the wooden chest. At his side Ward's rich Somerset accent comforted him.

'Down you go, sir. There's nothing to it.'

Brett's voice echoed from below. 'Danny! Come on down.'

Cautiously Danny stepped into the chest. 'Just take it steady, sir,' Ward told him. 'Reach down and you'll feel the ladder on the wall.'

Stuffing the torch in his pocket, Danny gingerly lowered himself. The beaming innkeeper leaned over to watch his progress. 'You're doing fine, sir. Only there's just one thing. Go easy when you get to the fourth rung . . .'

There was a sudden yell and a heavy thump. Ward shook his head sadly. 'It's missing, sir.'

Sprawled out on a stone floor, Danny sat up dizzily. 'Glad you mentioned it.'

Brett helped him to his feet. As Danny lit his torch he stared around him in fascination. A narrow corridor, whose bricks appeared centuries old, reached out into the darkness. Danny's voice sounded hollow.

'It's like the forty-seventh street subway. Where does it go?'

'It comes up right inside the house,' Brett told him.

'It does? Man, I've heard of connecting garages but connecting yourself to a pub ... Your folks knew how to live.'

Brett walked beneath the shaft of light that reached down from the settle. 'All right, Ward. You can close it now.'

'Very good, your Lordship. Enjoy yourselves.'

Danny made a face as there was a hollow thump and the light vanished. 'Enjoy yourselves? What does he think we are? A couple of vampires?'

Brushing aside cobwebs, Brett started down the tunnel. As they passed a side tunnnel there was a loud scuttering noise. Danny's voice sounded sepulchral. 'What was that?'

'Rats. They grow very big down here.'

'They do? How big?'

'Don't let them worry you,' Brett told him. 'Just watch out for their left jabs.'

Muttering to himself, Danny went quiet for a couple of minutes. The torchlight, illuminating the aged bricks,

showed a patch that was of a lighter colour and texture. The shape was that of a small archway and Brett paused before it. 'See that?' he asked.

Danny nodded. 'What about it?'

Brett put his torch nearer the bricked-up archway. 'About four hundred years ago, an ancestor of mine found his wife was being unfaithful.'

'Who to?' Danny demanded.

'Him. Who else? My ancestor was a very jealous man so he lured the wife's lover down here. In those days these corridors were the wine cellars and my ancestor's pretext was to taste a cask of wine . . .'

Danny gave a start. 'Wait a minute. It wasn't by any chance a cask of Amontillado?'

'As it happens it was.'

'Then I've read about it,' Danny said triumphantly. 'The two guys get drunk and eventually the lover passes out.'

'Exactly.'

'And then your ancestor bricks up the alcove.'

'Yes. He laboured all night. Brick by brick until the last one was in position. Then he fell into a deep and exhausted sleep.'

'And the lover died of starvation. Right?'

'Wrong. My ancestor was so drunk he didn't realize he was standing on the wrong side of the wall. The lover escaped and took all the spoils.'

Danny's face was a study of disgust. 'Will you stop your stories and just lead the way?'

Side tunnels became more frequent. As the two men passed a particularly sinister one, with water dripping from its low roof, Danny let out an exclamation. Brett turned. 'What's the matter?'

Danny hurried up alongside him. 'I thought I just saw Vincent Price!'

Brett led him down a tunnel that ended in a flight of stone steps. At the top of them was a section of oak panelling. As Brett's torch played on it Danny saw a pivoted metal flap

with a rusted iron lever nearby. Drawing aside the flap Brett put his eye to the spy hole beneath.

Danny tugged impatiently at his arm. 'What's out there?'

Brett drew back. Squinting through the hole Danny found himself looking into a moonlit room lined with books. 'The library at Greensleeves,' Brett told him, motioning him back and reaching for the iron lever. As he tugged on it there was a groan of rusted hinges and the oak panelling moved a couple of inches. Fascinated, Danny watched Brett apply his strength to the lever. This time, with a louder groan, the section of wall pivoted outwards.

As the two men stepped out cautiously into the library, Danny saw the secret door was located at the side of the fireplace. An old candelabrum projected from the wall above and as Brett reached up and twisted it, the section swung back and merged perfectly into the panelled wall.

Danny's low voice expressed his admiration. 'That's some arrangement.'

'It was standard practice when the house was built,' Brett told him. 'They always left a space between the outer and inner walls.'

'I'd like the builder's name,' Danny whispered. 'He'd make a fortune in Beverly Hills.'

Brett turned and began to wander across the library. 'Let's see what we've got here.'

He switched on the desk lamp and both men began examining the contents of the room. Brett looked thoughtful as he paused beside an antique table. 'You know it's odd but the things in this room, the books, the furniture, they're all things I would have chosen myself.'

Danny was examining a cluster of silver-framed photographs on the desk. 'Someone knows you pretty well. Take a look at these.'

Brett gazed at a photograph of himself in polo kit accepting a trophy from a regal looking figure. 'Wasn't that this year?' Danny asked.

As Brett nodded, Danny pointed to another picture. It was of a very beautiful woman and a man of distinguished

appearance with a beard. The setting was the terrace of a large house. 'Aren't they your parents?' Danny asked.

'Yes.'

A third photograph featured Brett in full Highland regalia and brought a grin to the American.

'You know something? You've got terrible legs.'

'They're not mine,' Brett told him. 'I borrowed them for the occasion.' Then his mood changed. 'Somebody has been very thorough. But who? And why?'

Danny moved towards the closed door. 'Let's take a look at the rest of the house.'

As Brett trod carefully after him, there was a sudden scratching sound. As both men froze, a loud mieow followed.

'Cat,' Danny said, showing relief.

Brett gave him a look and opened the door. The cat brushed past his legs, ran into the centre of the room, and sat staring at them with yellow eyes. Danny gave a shudder. 'This place is giving me the creeps. You don't think it's a familiar, do you?'

Before Brett could answer a light appeared at the top of the hall stairs. Drawing Danny back, Brett saw a girl appear on the landing. Wearing a twin-set, she was carrying a lightweight typewriter and a folder. As she began descending the staircase Brett recognized her as the beautiful girl they had seen riding the hunter earlier that evening.

Danny tugged at his arm. 'She might be heading this way.'

Brett nodded and silently closed the door. Danny ran to the desk, switched off the lamp, and stared desperately round the room for somewhere to hide. Unable to open the wall panel he ran for the curtains at the window and edged behind them. Brett, hearing the girl's footsteps approaching the door, dived behind the desk and crouched inside the kneehole.

The door swung open. From his vantage point Brett saw the girl's shapely legs move towards him. Clicking on the desk lamp, she set the typewriter on the desk and spread

out papers for signing. As she stood back the cat appeared behind her and gave a loud, recognition-demanding mieow. To Brett's horror the girl's face came level with his own as, with a laugh, she bent down to pick up the animal. With the distraction making her forget the lamp, she carried the cat out and closed the door. Just as Danny and Brett were about to emerge from their hiding places, voices outside made them pull back.

'Hello, Jackson. Look what I've found in the library.'

'In the library, miss? But the door was closed when I locked up.'

'Then I suppose she must have followed me in.'

Listening hard, Brett imagined suspicion growing in the man's voice. 'Was the light on when you went in?'

'No. Have I left it on?'

'Don't worry, miss. I'll see to it.'

'Thank you, Jackson. Good night.'

'Good night, Miss Melanie.'

The girl's footsteps receded towards the staircase. A moment later the library door opened again. The sudden, stealthy advance of Jackson's shoes across the carpet told Brett the manservant's suspicions had crystallized. Peering round the desk, Brett saw the reason a moment later. A pair of polished shoes were protruding from beneath the curtain. Holding his breath Brett watched the powerfully-built man tip-toe past, an automatic pistol gripped in his hand. Brett allowed himself one blink of surprise. Then, as Jackson was reaching out to snatch aside the curtain, he leapt forward and chopped down hard. As the man crumpled, Brett caught him and lowered him silently to the carpet. He then drew aside the curtain. Danny was standing with both hands comically pressed over his eyes. Brett touched his arm.

'It's all right. You can look now.'

Danny peered past his fingers at the unconscious manservant. 'What happened to him?'

'He fainted at the sight of your feet,' Brett said. Then his tone changed. 'Come on. We've got to make it look as if a burglar had broken in.'

All efficiency now, Danny opened a window and using his jacket to muffle the noise broke the glass near the catch. In the meantime Brett moved round the room pocketing small items of value. Returning to the desk to see what the girl had brought in, he saw a number of photographs of himself lying alongside a letter. He motioned Danny over. 'Look at these photographs. They've all got my height and weight on the back. And read this letter. It's addressed to a theatrical agent called Benny Ryan.'

Danny read the letter aloud. 'These are the latest photographs of Brett Sinclair. An exact double is too much to ask for but a close approximation will do. The actor will be paid two hundred pounds for the assignment. Yours faithfully, Piers Urquart.' Danny looked up. 'The name mean anything to you?'

Brett shook his head as he took the letter back. 'No. But the agency it's addressed to gives us a lead. Let's get out of here before Rasputin wakes up.'

The two men hurried towards the fireplace. The hidden doorway had hardly swung back into place before Jackson groaned and stirred.

CHAPTER THREE

The flurry of rain that swept down the narrow Soho street made Brett turn up the collar of his windcheater. Alongside him small restaurants lay huddled between strip clubs and betting shops. Brett turned a corner and came to a doorway next to a fruit shop. Checking the number with a piece of paper in his hand he pushed the door open and made his way down a seedy corridor. At the far end was a glass-panelled door with the legend BENNY RYAN, THEATRICAL AGENT, inscribed across it. With a last look of distaste at the tatty suroundings, Brett tapped on the door and pushed it open.

The room before him was small and crowded with the impedimenta of a small-time agent. A large desk, littered with letters and photographs, faced the door. The shabby walls were almost covered by glossy portraits. A pretty but hard-faced girl in a mini skirt was sitting in a chair. Pencil and pad in hand she was trying unenthusiastically to look like a personal secretary. Behind the desk Benny Ryan, with thinning hair and dandruff on his collar, was doing one of his fast acts on the telephone.

'What's that? Now you listen. This kid's been asked to play Hamlet with the Royal Shakespeare Company. What d'you mean – he's too short? Did Shakespeare say how tall Hamlet was? Oh, all right all right . . .'

Muttering to himself, Benny slammed the receiver down and scribbled notes on a pad. Brett gave a cough. 'Good morning.'

Benny's bloodshot eyes rose and winced. Wearing an old windcheater and a droopy false moustache, Brett looked like the character part in a tragi-comedy about unemployed actors.

'Well,' Benny snapped.

Brett gave another nervous cough. 'I'm thinking about changing my agent.'

'Try changing your profession,' Benny advised, scribbling on his pad again.

Pretending not to hear, Brett advanced across the shabby carpet. His eyes were on two photographs of himself that lay on one side of the agent's desk.

'I don't think they're handling me right.'

Benny's glance was long-suffering. 'Look, son – I couldn't help you even if you were Michael Caine. I'm up to here in stars. Business is wicked.'

'But everyone thinks I've got star quality,' Brett insisted.

Benny stared at him, seeing him properly for the first time. 'Son, you're about as close to being star quality as . . .' Suddenly he went as rigid as a pointer smelling a rabbit. Rising from his chair he gazed at Brett from close range, glanced down at the two photographs, then scrutinized

Brett again. Knowing he had Benny hooked, Brett sighed and turned to leave. 'Well, thank you for seeing me. I suppose I'll just have to try someone else . . .'

Benny came round the desk fast. 'Now just wait a minute, son. Maybe you do have something – a sort of animal magnetism. Who knows? Maybe I might just be able to do you a favour.'

Brett turned eagerly. 'I can do anything. Short, tall, fat thin . . All you have to do is try me.'

'You ever played a Lord?' Benny asked.

'I sang once in the chorus of the Student Prince.'

'Perfect.' Benny reached out and handed Brett one of the two photographs. 'Here's your big break. Shave off the handlebars, change the hair-style, and make yourself look like this.'

As Brett gazed at the photograph, Benny scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to him. 'As soon as you're ready, get yourself to this address.'

'What is it?' Brett asked innocently. 'Provincial theatre?'

'No. Country house charades. You play a Lord Sinclair. From memory, the pay's good.' Glaring at the girl who was ineptly searching for the Greensleeves letter, Benny snatched it from the desk and pretended to read it. 'Fifty quid a week and I won't even take commission. Fair enough?'

As Brett nodded, Benny reached for the phone. 'I'll let them know you're coming.' When Brett did not move his tone changed. 'Well, what are you waiting for? Applause?'

'I haven't got the fare,' Brett confessed.

With a look of disgust, Benny handed him a fiver. 'It'll come off your first week's wages. 'Now get moving – I want you there early this afternoon.'

Tattered suitcase in hand, Brett stood staring around the huge hall. .He was still wearing his droopy moustache and soiled windcheater and Jackson was eyeing him with disapproval. 'Yes; they expect you. You'd better wait in here while I go and tell them.'

He led Brett to the library door and motioned him inside.

Looking grateful, Brett waited until the man had vanished down the hall, then moved swiftly to the desk. He was examining the papers when he heard voices approaching. As he moved to the centre of the room two men and a girl entered.

The girl, Melanie Sadler, he recognized from the previous night's encounter. The men, soberly but expensively dressed, looked like government servants of some prominence. One was the urbane Urquart. The other, of equally distinguished appearance, was a man in his middle fifties with silver hair and cold blue eyes. His behaviour and the behaviour of the other two towards him suggested a certain superiority of rank. While the others examined Brett like some animal brought in for their inspection, he addressed Brett in a curt, clipped voice.

'I am Sir John Hassocks. This is Piers Urquart and Miss Melanie Sadler.'

Brett, pretending to show discomfort under their appraisal, held out his hand. 'How d'you do?'

His hand was left dangling in mid-air as the three circled him like judges at a horse show.

'His height's right,' Urquart said.

Hassocks nodded. 'And his weight.'

The inspection went on for a few more seconds, then Hassocks stood back and glanced at the others. 'Well, what do you think?'

The girl nodded. 'I think yes. Without the moustache, of course, and put into the right clothes.'

'Urquart?'

'I agree with Melanie. The likeness is extraordinary.'

The brusque Hassocks turned back to Brett. 'Do you think you could impersonate Lord Sinclair?'

'I think so, sir.'

'Ever acted an aristocrat before?'

'Er yes. Once to twice.'

Hassocks did a final tour of inspection, then nodded at Melanie. 'All right. Put him into the right clothes, get his moustache off, and we'll take another look.'

The girl led Brett upstairs to a well-appointed bedroom. As he dumped his suitcase on the bed, she crossed the room. 'Here's the bathroom. You'll find your clothes in here,' and she moved towards a large wardrobe.

Now that he was alone with her, Brett was making it clear he found her attractive. Melanie's behaviour showed she was aware of it as she opened the wardrobe door.

'You'd better come and choose something.'

Brett moved towards her. 'What do you suggest?'

'That's up to you. You're the actor. Put on whatever makes you feel the part. Use the "Method" or whatever you call it.'

Brett was now at her elbow. His nearness seemed to unsettle the girl and make it more difficult for her to play the efficient secretary. Frowning, she pointed at Brett's drooping moustache.

'Why do you wear that thing?'

'It's the trend.'

'It's a mistake. Without it you might look quite bearable.'

Brett grinned. 'Thanks.'

She gave him a look and walked towards the door. 'You'd better start getting dressed. You mustn't keep Sir John waiting.'

Hassocks and Urquart were sipping drinks in the library as she entered. 'Well?' Hassocks asked.

'He shouldn't be long.'

Frowning, Hassocks glanced at Urquart. 'I don't believe he can do it. The fellow's got no style.'

Melanie walked towards the cocktail cabinet. 'I wouldn't be too sure of that.'

Urquart poured her a sherry. 'The resemblance certainly is remarkable. Perhaps it might be enough.'

The three chatted for a moment, then Hassocks moved restlessly towards the door. 'Let's go and hustle him along.'

They were crossing the hall when Urquart gave a start and halted. The other two followed his gaze and came to a standstill. Brett, wearing a superbly-cut country suit and

looking every inch an aristocrat, was standing on the landing above. His self-assured voice had an imperious note as he began descending the stairs.

'Ah, Hassocks! And Urquart! My dear fellows – how good of you to come. Although I'm afraid I can't offer you any really good hunting. The tenant farmers have done for the foxes. They're using everything but hand grenades.'

He held out a hand as he neared the foot of the stairs. Instinctively both men responded, only for Brett to leave their hands in mid-air as he walked past them to Melanie. Embracing her, he gave her a kiss full on the lips.

'Melanie, darling. You look lovelier than ever.'

Delighted at his performance, the girl could not conceal a smile. In the manner of one born to command, Brett waved a hand down the hall. 'We'll use the library. It'll be more comfortable.'

Taking Melanie's arm he moved away. Astonished by the transformation, Hassocks and Urquart exchanged glances before following. Jackson, who had emerged from a side door, stared open-mouthed as Brett tossed him an order.

'We'll take tea in fifteen minutes.'

With his arm around Melanie's waist, Brett was standing proprietorially before the fireplace when Hassocks and Urquart entered. Breaking free Melanie moving smilingly towards the two men.

'Well? Isn't he convincing?'

Hassocks showed grudging admiration. 'Remarkably.'

'Clothes maketh the man,' Urquart smiled.

Clearly trying to regain his ascendancy, Hassocks walked towards Brett. 'However, playing a gentleman is a matter of detail. Can you keep it up?'

Brett gave him a quizzical smile. 'If you can, I can.'

'What the devil do you mean by that?' Hassocks asked, suddenly bristling.

Melanie hurried forward. 'John, don't be stuffy. It's a superb impersonation.'

'I agree,' Urquart said. 'Let's give him the final test.'

'Final test?' Brett asked.

Urquart nodded. 'You meet someone who's known the real Brett Sinclair since he was a child.'

Brett frowned. 'That's not fair. This is only a superficial performance. I don't know any character detail.'

There was malice in Hassocks' shrug. 'The ability to ad lib is important to the role.' He glanced at the girl. 'Go and get him, will you?'

As Melanie disappeared, Brett showed a concern that was only partly simulated. 'You'll have to give me some information – something to go on.'

'The man's name is Moorhead,' Urquart told him. 'He's been in service here most of his life. Get away with this and you've got the part.'

Inwardly Brett relaxed. 'But he's certain to talk of things I know nothing about,' he complained.

Hassocks motioned him to keep quiet as Melanie returned and waited alongside the door. A few seconds later an old retainer appeared. Very old, stooping slightly, he was deferential and yet had a strong personal dignity. As he glanced uncertainly round the library his eyes fell on Brett and immediately lit up.

'Milord!'

He hurried eagerly towards the fireplace. Brett, suggesting a trace of nervousness beneath his self-possession, held out his hand. 'Moorhead! Very good to see you again.'

'Thank you, milord. Might I say you are looking extremely fit?'

'You too, Moorhead. The years don't seem to make any mark on you. How long is it since I was last here?'

The old man showed no hesitation whatever. 'It will be seven years next month, sir.'

A quick glance showed Brett the others were watching the exchanges closely. 'Much too long, Moorhead.'

'We feel the same, milord. Do the renovations meet with your approval?'

'Yes, indeed. You've done a splendid job. Absolutely splendid.'

The old man betrayed his pleasure. 'You're very kind,

milord. By the by, I was distressed to read of young Master Reginald's unfortunate accident.'

Fully aware of the reference, Brett purposely blundered a little. 'Er, yes. Bad luck, wasn't it?'

'Very, sir. I trust he has fully recovered.'

'Er, yes. Yes, you could say he is on the mend.'

'I'm very glad to hear it, milord. Now, might I be of service to you?'

'Not at the moment, Moorhead. I called you in just to say hello.'

Deciding things had gone on long enough and it was time to re-assert his authority, Hassocks stepped forward. 'Thank you, Moorhead. You can go now.'

The old man glanced at him politely, then turned back to Brett. It was a gesture that said as clearly as words that now his master was back he took orders from no one else. Brett hid his smile.

'Thank you, Moorhead. That will be all.'

'Milord!' The retainer bowed and withdrew. As the library door closed, Brett received a look of respect from the onlookers.

'That was good enough for me,' Urquart said.

'And me,' Melanie smiled. 'Congratulations – Lord Sinclair.'

Hassocks' nod was grudging. 'Yes, I suppose you'll do. Consider yourself hired.'

Taking a cigar from a box on the desk, Brett released a cloud of smoke before shaking his head. 'Sorry. But the answer's no.'

The trio gave a start. 'What's that?' Hassocks barked.

Brett gave him a shrug. 'I'm not certain now that I want the part. Your agent spun me the yarn it was for country charades. But any fool could see there's something deeper going on. I want to know what it is before I stick my neck out.'

He saw all three of them exchange glances. A secret agreement appeared to be reached because Hassoocks turned and indicated the french windows that still displayed the damage inflicted by Danny the previous night.

'In the Foreign Office we believe that confidential matters are best discussed in the open air. Let's take a walk outside.' His dislike of Brett came out in his sarcasm. 'It will also serve to let Your Lordship see the extent of his property.'

They followed him along a wide terrace to a flight of steps. Below was a maze of ornamental shrubs and flower gardens and Hassocks led them into the heart of it before slackening his stride.

'You'll have gathered by this time that Greensleeves is the property of Lord Sinclair?'

'I had got that impression,' Brett murmured.

Hassocks gave him a stare, then went on: 'Lord Sinclair has very kindly loaned it to Her Majesty's Government as a base for secret talks with Richard Congoto.'

Brett looked blank and Melanie explained. 'He's the Prime Minister of Zanda. It's a central African state.'

'Congoto's a very difficult man to deal with,' Hassocks continued. 'In fact he only agreed to come because he knew Lord Sinclair had given our project his blessing. This is because the two men once went to school together.'

Brett was looking puzzled. 'But if Lord Sinclair has agreed to this, why do you need me?'

'Because Sinclair has gone off in one of his sulks,' Melanie told him.

Brett blinked. 'His sulks?'

'Yes. He's famous for them. There was a tiff over the arrangements and he stalked off saying he would have nothing more to do with the idea. Which put us in a frightful spot because we had already invited Congoto over.' Reaching an intersection of paths, the girl paused. 'Let's walk across the stream.'

Unthinking, Brett turned down a lane of shrubs. Neither of the men noticed his slip but he received a surprised look from the girl. Instantly aware of his error, he halted. 'Which way?'

'The way you're going,' Melanie told him.

'You see our problem,' Urquart said, giving the impression

he was appealing to Brett's sense of patriotism. 'If Sinclair isn't here when Congoto arrives, he'll go straight back to Zanda. Which means that talks very vital to this country will never take place.'

'But if Congoto was at school with Sinclair, how can I hope to get away with it?'

'You got away with it with Moorhead, didn't you?' Hassocks said irritably. 'In any case, that was a long time ago. You can leave it to us to make certain you're not left alone with Congoto long enough to start reminiscing about your schooldays.'

'Don't worry,' Urquart said, nodding at Melanie who was a few yards ahead of them. 'Melanie will brief you on all the important facts of Sinclair's life.'

'In fact, all you have to do is learn a few facts parrot-fashion,' Hassocks broke in maliciously. 'Isn't that what you actor chaps are good at?'

Brett turned sharply. Expecting a confrontation, Urquart laid a warning hand on his colleague's arm. Instead Brett gave the man an even smile. 'I take it you're saying that actors are very much like politicians. They say what they're paid to say.'

Hassocks' ruddy face turned livid. Turning his back, Brett walked down the path and took Melanie's arm. Hassocks' furious voice followed him as he led her away. 'There's something you'd better remember. This whole affair comes under the Official Secrets Act. One word about it and you'll find yourself in gaol.'

CHAPTER FOUR

The library was in darkness except for the pool of light thrown by the desk lamp. One end of the desk was piled with books, the other covered by sheets of typescript. Brett and Melanie were sitting facing one another. They had been at work a long time and both looked tired. Brett had a sheet

of typescript in his hand and was studying it. Melanie gave him a few seconds longer and then took it from him.

'All right; let's try it. Who was your housemaster at Eton?'

Brett pretended to hesitate. 'David Hamlin. We used to call him the Pied Piper.'

'Correct. What happened during your last term?'

'I was nearly expelled.'

'Why?'

'For smuggling girls into the dormitory.'

Melanie hid a smile. 'Your third cousin on your mother's side. What's his name?'

Brett yawned. 'Sir Waverly Caspar Noble.'

Melanie leaned back with a relieved sigh. 'That's very good. We've accomplished a lot this evening.'

Brett eyed her appreciatingly. 'We could accomplish a good deal more if you'd stop being a school ma'am for a couple of hours.'

Melanie's look as she rose suggested she would not be unwilling if the circumstances were different. 'You've a lot more studying to do before you start playing games and anyway I'm too tired tonight.'

Crossing to the door she gave him a mocking glance before going out. 'County gentlemens' lessons begin prompt at eight in the morning. See you then. Good night.'

'Good night,' Brett sighed. He waited until the door closed and suddenly became very active. Giving a bell rope by the fireplace a tug, he ran back to the desk and began scribbling a note. He had just finished it when there was a tap and Moorhead entered.

'You rang, milord?'

Brett nodded. 'Close the door, Moorhead, and come over here.'

As the old man obeyed, Brett leaned over the desk, his voice low. 'I'm sure you'll have noticed that there is something distinctly odd going on here.'

'Yes, I have sensed a certain undercurrent of intrigue, milord. Could it have anything to do with the fact that your hair is subtly different in style?'

Brett grinned. 'It is a factor, Moorhead. Now listen carefully. Tomorrow morning I want you to get a call from a sick relative. It's so urgent you have to leave right away.'

The old retainer did not move a muscle. 'I understand, sir.'

'Tell Hassocks or the other chap that you've arranged for another butler to help out while you're away. Then take this note to the American gentleman who is staying in the Jane Seymour inn.'

Moorhead took the note Brett handed him and tucked it inside his evening coat. 'Very good, milord. How long do you wish me to stay away?'

'Give me a ring in a couple of days to let me know how your relative is. I'll let you know then.' When the old man did not question him, Brett went on: 'I'll explain everything when it's over.'

'Thank you, sir. In the meantime there is perhaps something you should know.'

'What's that?'

Moorhead glanced back at the door, then thrust a hand beneath his armpit and drew it out meaningfully. 'All the staff are "heeled", sir.'

Brett gave a thoughtful grin. 'Thank you, Moorhead.'

From the terrace Melanie and Urquart watched a groom leading two hunters round to the front of the house. The morning was fine and the grounds radiant in the sunlight. Melanie, who looked delectable in riding habit, drew Urquart's eyes.

'What are you giving him now? Riding lessons?'

The girl nodded. 'Congoto might want to go riding and it would be a dead give away if he couldn't keep in the saddle.'

'You've a point,' Urquart admitted dryly. Both of them turned as Moorhead came out on the terrace. Wearing a coat and carrying a small suitcase, he looked apologetic as he approached them.

'I am sorry for any inconvenience I might be causing, sir,

but I'm sure you'll be more than satisfied with my replacement.'

Urquart shrugged. 'It's a nuisance but I suppose it can't be helped. Has Lord Sinclair arranged for your transport to the station?'

'Yes, sir. The station wagon is taking me in.'

As the old man disappeared round the side of the house, Brett emerged on the terrace. Resplendent in riding habit, he gave the waiting couple a bright smile.

'Good morning! Was that Moorhead I saw leaving?'

Urquart nodded. 'A family problem – if one can believe him.'

Brett showed surprise. 'What other reason would he have?'

'It hasn't occurred to you he might have recognized you as a fake?'

'Moorhead? Never. He knows one of nature's earls when he sees one.'

Amused by Brett's self-confidence, Melanie jumped from the terrace wall and started down the steps. 'Well, let's see how good nature's earl is on a horse. Congoto must have heard what an excellent seat Sinclair is supposed to have.'

Brett followed her, his head cocked on one side as he admired her shapely figure. His quizzical voice reached back to Urquart. 'I'm loathe to admit it but from my point of view Sinclair has a rival!'

First walking and then cantering, the girl led Brett towards a low range of hills north of the estate. Pausing by a clump of trees that overlooked a grassy hillside, she gave Brett a congratulatory smile as he reined in alongside her. 'Not bad. Where did you learn to ride like that?'

Brett's eyes twinkled. 'I once had a bit part in The Charge of the Light Brigade.'

She laughed and pointed downwards. 'Come on. I'll race you to the bottom of the hill.'

Before Brett could answer she urged her horse forward. Gathering speed, the powerful animal made for a hedge that ran across the hillside. Showing concern Brett gave a shout

but the girl did not hear him. Spurring his horse Brett went after her in earnest. She was no more than fifteen yards from the hedge and preparing to lift her horse over it when Brett swung in and grabbed her bridle. Snorting, both horses reared and Brett had to throw an arm around the girl to prevent her falling. As he soothed the horses she saw there was a steep drop behind the hedge and a barbed wire fence behind it.

Turning pale, she leaned against him for a moment. 'Thanks. You saved me a broken bone or two, if not my neck. But how did you know the ditch was there?'

Baffled for an answer, Brett could only escape by banter. 'Horses are wonderful things, aren't they? When he saw what you were doing, I couldn't hold him back.'

Humming, he swung his hunter round and began cantering away, leaving Melanie staring after him.

Pacing past the windows of the library, Brett caught a glimpse of the battered Mini as it left the drive and parked in the forecourt behind a glittering limousine. Pausing to watch, Brett saw a solemn, blacked-coated figure alight, drag out a suitcase, and make for the terrace. Satisfied, Brett turned back. Hassocks and Urquart, checking his progress, were seated in leather armchairs near the fireplace. Melanie was at the desk. Seeing she had regained Brett's attention she asked her question again.

'And what did you do next?'

Brett wandered back to the desk. 'I served with my regiment in Korea where I received a couple of decorations that I'm much too modest to mention. My Commanding Officer was Colonel Frank Cunningham and . . .'

A tap on the door interrupted him. Sitting down he adopted his imperious manner. 'Yes?'

Jackson appeared. His glance was at Hassocks. 'The replacement butler has arrived, sir.'

Hassocks waved an impatient hand. 'You deal with him. Take him round and show him the ropes.'

Brett's sharp voice halted the manservant in his tracks.

'Certainly not. I want to see the fellow's references. Show him in.'

Hassocks flushed at Brett's interference but Urquart gave Jackson a nod. The man withdrew, to lead in the Mini driver a moment later. It was Danny, wearing a black coat, striped trousers, and a respectful expression. Approaching Brett he gave a bow and clicked his heels together. His accent was vague but intended to be mid-European.

Brett's eyes were twinkling maliciously as they moved over him. 'What's your name?'

'Gregor, sir.'

'Very well, Gregor. I imagine you have references.'

'Of course, sir. And very good ones too.'

Brett clicked his fingers. 'Don't just stand there. Let me see them.'

Danny pulled out a sheaf of papers from his inside pocket. Brett pretended to glance through them. 'I see you've buttled for Lord Medenham.'

'That is so.'

Brett glanced up sharply. Swallowing hard, Danny added: 'Milord.'

'That's better.' Brett flicked over a paper. 'He seems to have been quite satisfied with you.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Brett handed back the papers. 'However, Medenham never was very demanding. You'll find we run a much tighter ship here. For example, there will be no going around here with hands like that.'

Danny glanced down at his hands which were grease-stained. 'I'm sorry, milord, but I had to change a wheel. I had a blow-out.'

Brett lifted an eyebrow. 'Blow-out?'

'Puncture, sir. Forgive me but I worked for a time in America.'

'One must try not to hold that against you. However, I shall expect no more crude Americanisms. You will remember that, Gregor.'

Danny swallowed again. 'Yes, milord. I'll try to remember.'

'Please do. Now you can go. Jackson will show you to your quarters.'

Danny began to back away, bowing all the way to the door. As he was about to exit, Brett's voice checked him. 'Oh, and Gregor. . . .'

Danny turned. 'Milord?'

'Get your hair cut. You look like a middle-aged hippie.'

In another dimension Danny was throwing hysterical punches. 'Yes, milord. Anything else, milord?'

'No. You can go now.'

The door closed hollowly. Melanie, who had found difficulty containing herself, burst out laughing. 'That was priceless. What a funny man.'

'Isn't he?' Brett grinned.

Hassocks was less amused. 'You over-played that. You're getting too big for your boots.'

Brett gazed down. 'I still seem to slip into them easily enough.'

Face tight with dislike, Hassocks rose and crossed to the door. 'I could slip you out of them just as easily. I'd advise you to bear that in mind.'

Upstairs Jackson was pushing open an attic door. 'Here's your room. Don't blame me if you don't like it. Lord Sinclair chose it for you.'

Danny gazed into a small servant's room equipped with the barest essentials. Although breathing hard, he managed a smile. 'I'm sure he had a good reason. Thank you. It will suffice.'

Giving him a mocking grin, Jackson went out. The moment the door closed the frozen smile dropped from Danny's face. Stalking over to a wall mirror he glared into it belligerently. '"Crude Americanisms" ... "We run a much tighter ship" ... Who does he think he is? Captain Bligh?'

A tap on the door quietened him. Opening it, he found Brett gazing furtively left and right to make certain he was unobserved. With the light of battle in his eye, Danny let him in.

'Nice to see you, *milord*. What have you come for – to wash my hands and give me a haircut?'

Brett's tone was conciliatory. 'I had to come and tell you, Danny. You played your part perfectly.'

'So did you,' Danny growled. 'Now I understand the French Revolution better. And the little baskets beneath the guillotine.'

'No, seriously. You were terrific.'

'You think so?' Danny asked, slightly mollified.

'Absolutely. If you ever fall on hard times, you've always got a future buttling for me.'

'Oh, funny, funny. When the jokes are over, have you figured out what's going on?'

'Not in any detail. But I'm certain it's nothing good. I'll know more when Richard Congoto arrives.'

'When is that? Do you know?'

Brett moved towards the door. 'I daren't be away long or they'll wonder what I'm doing.'

Danny followed him. 'Congoto! When?'

'Nine o'clock tonight,' Brett told him, slipping out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Two floodlights were illuminating the forecourt of Greensleeves that evening when a huge black limousine made a stately turn and halted at the foot of the steps. The driver jumped out and opened the rear door. The first man to emerge was Richard Congoto. Wearing a high-necked tunic, he was an extremely handsome African of the same age as Brett who was waiting at the foot of the steps to greet him.

Behind Congoto, an older African stepped from the car. He was more formally dressed in a dark suit. Pausing, he helped a young woman to alight. Dark, slim, and very beautiful, she was Paris groomed from head to toe.

Richard Congoto's expression of pleasure at seeing Brett

made it seem for a moment as if all diplomatic formalities would be forgotten. It was Brett, coming forward quickly, who saved him from embarrassment.

'Good evening, Mr Prime Minister. This is a great honour.'

The two men shook hands formally. Only a close observer would have noticed Brett's index finger extended on Congoto's wrist as their hands clasped or seen the African's slight start. Recovering immediately Congoto stood back and introduced his companions.

'It is a great pleasure to see you again, Lord Sinclair. Allow me to introduce my daughter Carmen and my Finance Minister Dr Kibu.'

After more formal handshakes Brett introduced Hassocks and Urquart. The party then moved into the brilliantly-lit hall where the rest of the household were waiting to receive them. Melanie was standing a few feet inside the threshold. Jackson and two other hard-looking manservants named Peyton and Jones were standing in a line, with Danny at the far end. As the glamorous Carmen appeared the American's face showed unqualified approval.

Brett introduced Melanie to Congoto. 'Your Excellency – this is Miss Melanie Sadler.'

Congoto shook hands with the girl, then turned to Brett. 'I'll look forward to meeting your colleagues more informally later, Lord Sinclair. For the moment, as the journey has been rather strenuous, perhaps you would show me to my rooms.'

'Of course, Your Excellency.'

As Brett led Congoto upstairs, the rest of the party began to drift towards the library, their conversation coming more easily as the formality of the occasion began to break down. Neither Brett nor Congoto spoke until they were safely inside a luxurious suite on the first floor. Then, as Brett closed the door, the atmosphere changed dramatically. Laughing his pleasure, Congoto slapped Brett across the shoulders. 'Piggy! It's great to see you again.'

Brett cuffed him affectionately about the face. 'Congo! It's been a long time.'

The two men beamed at one another with the love of old friends. 'I read about you in the papers from time to time,' Congoto said.

'You get a fair amount of space yourself,' Brett grinned. 'Prime Minister – who'd have guessed it twenty years ago?'

'Not Hamlin, that's for sure. I'll bet he threw a fit when he heard it.' Then the African's mood changed. 'That handshake of yours, Brett. The old schoolboy one. What were you warning me about.'

Brett frowned. 'I'm not sure yet but things aren't what they seem. I might be able to make a guess once you tell me why you're here.'

Congoto stared at him. 'But you know why I'm here. You set it up.'

His bewilderment grew as Brett shook his head. 'Not I. I wouldn't have known anything about your visit except for the oddest chance.'

The African sank into a chair. 'Go on.'

Brett motioned at a table of drinks. 'Wouldn't you like something first?'

'No. I want to hear what all this is about. At once, please.'

'It started when I had a credit note for an overcharge by a construction firm,' Brett explained. 'An overcharge for work done here at Greensleeves. I hadn't authorized any work so I came down to take a look. I found the place done up like new and Hassocks, Urquart, the girl, and the servants, who look suspiciously like heavies to me, all comfortably installed.'

The African's handsome face was showing anger. 'You mean I've been tricked into coming here?'

'It looks that way. What was the story they gave you?'

'They said your government wanted confidential talks about financing nickle mining in my country. I was very reluctant to come – I was afraid my political enemies might try to take over in my absence. They're very ruthless.'

'Yet you still agreed to come?'

'Yes but only in the utmost secrecy. Nobody knows I've left Zanda.'

'What persuaded you to take the risk?'

'You. Or rather the use of your name. I was told you had personally endorsed the talks.'

'I see,' Brett said slowly.

'I wish I did. What's their game, Brett?'

'I'm not sure. But I've the feeling we're going to find out very soon.'

Congoto rose purposefully from his chair. 'I'm not waiting that long. I'm getting Carmen out of here.'

'I doubt if they'll let you. There are so many shoulder holsters around here the whole house leans to the left.'

'Then what do you suggest?'

'The odds and the surprises aren't all on their side,' Brett explained, going on to tell the African about Danny. 'My idea is to wait until they make their move. That'll give me and Danny time to work something out. Remember our motto – Consilio et Prudentia?'

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Congoto had to laugh. 'Sneaky is best?'

Brett grinned. 'Correct. How do you think we sneaks got to the top? We're just hoods in coronets.' His tone changed as he made for the door. 'Don't worry. We'll find a way out of this.'

Down in the library Carmen was seated in an armchair while Hassocks, Urquart and Dr Kibu talked in low tones near the door. As the girl glanced at them, the silver-haired Hassocks turned to her apologetically.

'I wonder if you would excuse us for a moment, my dear. We would like Dr Kibu to approve the agenda of the meeting.'

'Of course,' Carmen told him.

The three men went out. As the girl lit a cigarette Danny appeared carrying a tray laden with coffee. Seeing Carmen was alone he approached her with alacrity.

'Your coffee, madam. May I pour it for you?'

'Thank you, er ... What's your name?'

'Gregor, madam.'

The girl's dark eyes appraised him. 'You're not English?'

'No, madam. I am Hungarian.'

Carmen showed sudden excitement. 'You are? Oh, that's wonderful. What city?'

Danny's confidence began to seep away like water through a sieve. 'Er, Budapest.'

'Really. I lived for two years in Budapest. At university.'

The stream of coffee from Danny's pot wavered as if in a high wind. 'You did?'

'How long is it since you left?' Carmen asked him in Hungarian.

Danny took on a glassy smile as he put down the coffee pot and picked up the sugar tongs. 'Sugar, madam?'

'Two lumps,' the girl said, still in Hungarian.

Watching her expression intently, Danny dropped one lump into the cup, then two, and then three. When she still showed no reaction Danny began to panic. 'Can I get you something else, madam? Kippers? Boiled crumpets?'

The girl burst out laughing. 'You're no more Hungarian than I am. In fact I'm beginning to doubt if you're a butler.'

With the game up, Danny decided there was only one course open. 'Sssssh! Don't say that. You're right but there's nothing to worry about. I'm on your side.'

Carmen's laughter ceased. 'On my side?'

'Right. All you have to do is say nothing and trust me.'

The girl backed away. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I'm not sure I know myself,' the sweating Danny confessed. 'But one thing is for sure – this set-up is crooked and Brett and I are trying to find out why.'

Carmen's face suddenly brightened. 'You are a friend of Lord Sinclair?'

'Yeah.' Danny stared down at his black coat and striped trousers with hatred. 'That's why I'm in this penguin suit. He asked me to help him.'

The girl had now pulled herself together. 'In that case you don't need to worry. I won't give you away.'

Upstairs, as Brett left Congoto's suite, he saw Melanie

crossing the landing. She was inspecting the portraits on the wall and did not notice Brett at first.

'Time to change for dinner,' he said.

She glanced round and smiled. 'Just what I was coming to do.' She indicated a large oil alongside her. 'The third earl looks a bit of a dog.'

Brett approached her. 'That's not the third earl. He's the fourth. The third earl died when he was three. Never got round to having his portrait painted.'

Melanie looked impressed. 'You have done your homework well.'

Brett grinned at her. 'I'm a hard worker. Any night you want to know anything more about the Sinclairs you've only to knock on my door.'

The glance he received turned immediately into a smile. 'Thanks. I'll remember.'

As Jackson came out of the servants' quarters, he noticed Danny standing near the dinner gong. The heavy-jowled manservant gave a curt nod. 'You can sound it. Dinner's ready.'

Looking like a boy given permission to play with a new toy, Danny moved forward with relish. Running up the stairs, Jackson tapped on Brett's door.

Brett was tying a shoelace as the man entered. He glanced briefly over his shoulder. 'Yes?'

'Dinner's served,' Jackson told him.

At that moment there was a thundering clangour downstairs that sent shock waves reverberating through the house. Brett stiffened. 'You don't say? Who's that on the gong?'

'Your new butler,' Jackson said with some malice.

'He must think he's Bombadier Billy Wells! Tell him he's not supposed to wake the dead – we haven't enough chairs.'

As Brett bent over his shoelace again Jackson closed in. Drawing a cosh from his pocket, the man brought it down hard. Brett gave a single groan, crumpled, and lay in a heap on the floor. A look of triumph on his face, Jackson crossed the bedroom and picked up the telephone.

CHAPTER SIX

The huge hall echoed to voices as the dining-room door opened. Danny emerged first and drew respectfully to one side as the others began drifting out. Hassocks, Dr Kibu and Congoto were the first to appear. Urquart and Carmen followed a moment later. The African Prime Minister was showing some concern as he talked to Hassocks.

'I'm very sorry Lord Sinclair wasn't able to dine with us. Is he likely to join us over coffee?'

Hassocks was looking appropriately regretful. 'I'm sure he will if it is possible.'

'I hope so. I would prefer him to be present when we begin our discussions.'

Urquart moved up alongside the two men, his voice smooth and reassuring. 'Unfortunately he has been unavoidably detained. But he asked me to apologize and to say he will join you as soon as possible.'

Left alone for the moment, Carmen gave Danny a concerned glance. The American waited until all five of them had disappeared into the library. Then, making sure he was unobserved, he ran upstairs to Brett's room. Finding it empty he was examining the locked windows when a truculent voice made him turn sharply. Jackson was standing in the doorway.

'What are you doing up here?'

Danny assumed an offended appearance. 'As his Lordship missed dinner I came to see if he would like to toy with a little cold grouse.'

Jackson jerked a thumb. 'They'll be calling for coffee in a moment. Go on down.'

'I am perfectly familiar with normal household procedure, Jackson!'

'You could've fooled me,' the man growled. 'Get moving! And in the future keep out of this room unless you're called for.'

Danny's haughty exit was a minor masterpiece but did not prevent the manservant's eyes following him suspiciously.

Brett opened his eyes. At first he could see nothing but a grey blur. Then his eyes focused and he saw there was a stone wall two feet from his nose. As he stirred he heard a woman's mocking voice.

'Will the real Lord Sinclair please stand up?'

Rolling over, Brett saw he was in a cellar. With stone walls, it had a stoutly-built door but no window. Melanie, cool and slimly beautiful in a turquoise evening gown, was standing alongside one of the servants, Peyton, a stocky, bullet-headed character who was gripping a pistol.

Brett drew himself into a sitting position. 'I'm not sure I can.' He rubbed the back of his head ruefully. 'Tell me. Where did I go wrong?'

'You were too good to be true. I had my suspicions earlier but that information about the third earl did it. It's not in any of the history books.'

'Are you sure? It should be.'

'It's not in any I lent you.'

'Careless of me,' Brett murmured.

'There's something else,' the girl told him. 'You have the Sinclair dimple. It's in all the portraits. And not even Olivier can act a dimple.'

Brett grinned at her. 'Well, that seems like the end of what was promising to be a beautiful friendship.'

The look he received was enigmatic. 'It needn't be. Why don't you give me a ring when this is over?'

'I can't wait.'

'Neither can I,' Melanie said, glancing at the gunman. 'All right, Peyton. He's safe enough in here. We'd better get back upstairs.'

The man nodded and keeping the pistol levelled at Brett

followed her out. A moment later the door closed, a key turned, and Brett was alone.

Danny tip-toed furtively across the hall. Reaching the library door he took a last guilty look around and then applied his eye to the keyhole.

The scene inside the room was informal. Brandy had been poured and cigars were lit. Urquart and Dr Kibu were seated in armchairs. Congoto and Carmen, acting as if unaware of their danger, were sitting together on a settee. Hassocks was at the desk. His manner was that of a company chairman opening a board meeting as his pale eyes moved benevolently around the room.

'Well, gentlemen, shall we begin?' As the others gave him their attention, his gaze settled on Congoto.

'I'm afraid my first task is to make a small confession, Prime Minister.'

Only Carmen noticed her father's tension as he leaned forward. 'I shall be most interested to hear it, sir.'

Hassocks looked appropriately apologetic. 'I'm afraid we are not connected with the British Government as you were led to believe. We do however represent a huge consortium of mining companies who are most interested in Zanda's nickel deposits.'

Congoto sat back with a sigh of understanding. Seeing his expression, Urquart broke in hastily. 'We knew you'd never come over here to have talks with private business interests. At the same time we were confident that if you did come, we could interest you.'

Hassocks' smile was smooth and disarming. 'In the circumstances a harmless enough deception, don't you agree?'

'No, I do not,' Congoto said scornfully. 'But go on, gentlemen. You are already self-confessed liars. What other deceptions have you committed?'

Squinting through the keyhole Danny saw Hassocks' face harden at the insult. Before he could catch the man's reply the slam of a door made him spin round. A display cabinet

of weapons stood against the adjacent wall and he edged behind it. A few seconds later Melanie, Jackson and Peyton appeared.

'Stay outside,' Melanie told Jackson. 'You might be needed.'

Jackson, clearly in charge of the heavies, turned to Peyton as Melanie disappeared into the library. 'Who's holding the key to the cellar?'

The man jerked a thumb at the closed library door. 'Miss Melanie. Don't worry. Sinclair couldn't get out of there with a battering ram.'

'All right. I'll take care of this. You get back into the kitchen.' As Peyton moved away, Jackson called after him. 'And keep an eye on that new butler. There's something about him I don't like.'

With Jackson remaining outside the library, Danny was trapped behind the cabinet. Inside the library Melanie had paused by the door to avoid interrupting Hassocks' persuasive voice.

'Before you make any more comments, at least listen to our terms. Our consortium would expect eighty-five percent of the profits.'

Congoto gave a laugh of contempt. 'So you are cheats as well as liars!'

Urquart raised a protesting hand. 'Mr Prime Minister, we are entitled to a substantial return on what is, after all, a huge investment. We are quite prepared that a further ten per cent should go to the government of Zanda.'

'You are very generous with Zanda's resources, sir. And what happens to the remaining five per cent?'

Urquart glanced at Hassocks who played his trump card.

'That goes into a numbered Swiss account for you. No one but us here will ever know of it.'

'You see,' Urquart finished. 'Everyone benefits and no one loses.'

Before Congoto could reply Melanie moved forward. 'We have all the documents drawn up, Prime Minister. All they need is your signature.'

Looking by this time the most relaxed man in the room, Congoto took a contemplative sip of brandy, then glanced at Hassocks. 'What would my share amount to?'

Carmen gave a gasp of protest. Glancing at Urquart, Hassocks leaned forward, his cold eyes unable to hide their triumph. 'Not less than one million sterling within the next five years.'

Congoto raised an eyebrow. 'That is a great deal of money.'

Horrified, Carmen jumped to her feet. 'Father!'

With an impatient gesture, Congoto silenced her. Hassocks, certain now of his man, was smiling. 'In addition, there will be an immediate payment of one hundred thousand made to you in advance of profits.'

Congoto nodded gravely. 'Thank you. I wanted to know exactly how much I would be turning down.'

Hassocks' ruddy face went pale with anger. As Carmen gave a cry of relief, Congoto rose and took her arm. 'Come on, child. We're leaving.' He turned to Dr Kibu. 'Have the car brought round immediately, will you? Our business here is over.'

He led Carmen towards the door. To his amazement Kibu moved in front of him. 'I'm sorry, Richard. But I'm afraid you can't leave until this matter is settled.'

Congoto looked thunderstruck. 'You? One of them?'

The middle-aged African nodded. 'It was I who did all the preliminary work. Your refusal to co-operate was always a possibility so naturally we were forced to make alternative plans. Please return to your seats.'

Coldly angry now, Congoto pushed forward. 'Get out of my way.'

He stiffened as the hard muzzle of a pistol dug into his back. Turning, he found himself gazing into Urquart's urbane face. 'I'd advise you to obey,' the man said quietly.

Out in the hall Danny was growing more and more impatient at his enforced helplessness. Peering round the cabinet and seeing that Jackson was paying more attention to what was happening inside the library than outside it, he

began to edge along the wall. He was almost clear when a splinter of wood caught his jacket and the cabinet rocked slightly. As the sound caught Jackson's attention, Danny drew back and held his breath.

He heard the man mutter something and start towards him. Believing discovery was inevitable, Danny was bracing himself when the library door opened.

'Jackson. Come in here!'

With a last glance at the cabinet, Jackson followed Hassocks inside. Danny waited until the door closed and then hurried down a corridor that led to the basement.

Inside the library Hassocks motioned Jackson to wait by the door as he turned to Congoto. 'If I were you, I wouldn't decide on a matter of this importance so hastily. Have a few minutes to talk things over with your daughter. Jackson will take you upstairs to your rooms.'

'I've already given you my decision,' the African said quietly.

'Then reconsider it, my dear chap.' Hassocks glanced at Urquart who still had the pistol in his hand. 'Go with them and make sure they know the alternatives.'

'By alternatives I suppose you mean threats?'

Hassocks shrugged. 'If you prefer the word.' His attention moved to Carmen. 'You seem to forget we hold your daughter too.'

Congoto gave a start. 'You wouldn't harm her?'

'My dear chap, I don't want to harm anybody. At the same time, with the stakes as high as they are, I don't intend letting anything stand in my way. Not even her life.'

'You can't be serious!'

'I assure you I'm very serious. Now please go and think about it.'

As Urquart and Jackson followed the shocked African and his daughter outside, Hassocks turned to Melanie with a sigh. 'Life must be very difficult when one has the handicaps of honesty and integrity. I'm eternally grateful I've never suffered from them.' He moved to the bell rope by the fireplace. 'Shall we have coffee?'

Melanie was looking troubled. 'Do you believe that bluff about harming his daughter will work?'

Hassocks glanced back in surprise. 'My dear Melanie – that was no bluff. Surely you know me better than that.'

The girl turned pale. 'We couldn't go that far. I wouldn't let you.'

The man's suave façade suddenly fell away as he gave a hard laugh. 'Now don't go feminine on me. If you don't like the heat, get out of the kitchen. And out of the deal. I'm not turning back now. Not with millions staring me in the face.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Left alone in the cellar Brett was examining the stone walls when the grille on the door slid open. As he stepped quickly back, Danny's hissed whisper reached him.

'Hi, pal. What're you doing down here? All the action's upstairs.'

Brett put his nose to the grille. 'Never mind the small talk. Get me out of here.'

'Melanie's got the key,' Danny told him. 'But don't worry. Who needs keys?'

Brett started as the American turned and ran back along the shadowy corridor. 'Danny. Wait. . . .'

Danny's voice echoed back to him. 'It's all right, pal. Just relax and stand well back.'

Running footsteps sounded. Wincing, Brett put a hand over his eyes. There was a heavy thump, a yell of pain, and then silence. Brett peered through the grille again. 'Danny?'

There was a scrabbling sound and Danny's face, contorted with pain, rose into view. 'You know a good bone-setter?'

'If you'd given me a chance to tell you. . . .' Brett complained. 'Listen, what these people don't know is that these cellars are connected with the tunnel system.' He pointed

at a line of rusted rings on the right-hand wall. 'I haven't had time to try them yet but I'm pretty certain one controls a secret door.'

Danny rose on tip-toe to view the rings. 'What are you waiting for?'

Turning, Brett began tapping the wall. The sounds were solid until he reached a slab with a ring in its top corner. As he twisted and tugged the ring, there was the sudden groan of rusted machinery. A moment later, to Danny's excitement, the slab began to open outwards. It swung out about two inches and then stopped. Dropping the ring Brett put both hands into the chink and tugged. The slab moved another inch and then stuck again. Putting his feet against the wall Brett tugged with all his strength but the slab was tightly jammed. Breathing hard, he returned to the door.

'You'll have to get into the tunnel and try to open it from the other side.'

'OK. But how?'

'Use the secret door in the library.'

'You are forgetting one small thing. There are people in there.'

'Don't bother me with details,' Brett said impatiently. 'Try to remember your way once you're in the tunnel. You turn left, right, right again, then left and down.'

Danny silently mouthed the instructions. 'Got it! Don't go away. I'll be back.'

Closing the grille, Danny ran back through the basement and upstairs into the hall. As he moved cautiously towards the library the sound of muffled voices told him there were still people inside. He gazed round the hall for something that would cause a diversion. His eyes fell on the huge dinner gong and lit up with anticipation. Picking up the padded stick, he swung it over his shoulder like a hammer-thrower at the Olympic Games. The next instant a tremendous clangor sounded through the house, with Danny's yell adding to the din.

'Fire! ... Look out! Fire! Fire!'

The library door was flung open and Hassocks appeared. Danny, pounding wildly at the gong, pointed across the hall. 'Upstairs! The place is ablaze.'

With an exclamation, Hassocks ran for the staircase. Dropping the stick Danny dived for the library, slammed the door, and turned the key. Hassocks, halfway up the staircase, realized he had been duped and ran back. As he shouted for help, Peyton came running out from the servants' quarters and both men began hammering on the locked library door.

Inside the room Melanie was staring at Danny with some alarm. He pulled the key from the door and pocketed it. 'You're coming with me to see Brett,' he said, making for the secret panel.

A faint sound made both of them turn sharply. Dr Kibu, forgotten by Melanie until this moment, was emerging from the shelter of a huge armchair. Seeing he had a pistol in his hand, Danny snatched a heavy book from a shelf and hurled it. As the African instinctively ducked, Danny leapt forward and caught him with a punch that stretched him out unconscious on the carpet.

There was a splintering crash as Peyton hurled his bulk against the door. As Danny turned back he saw Melanie had snatched up Kibu's pistol but instead of threatening him with it she offered it to him butt first.

'You've got to stop them,' she said urgently. 'They're planning to kill both Carmen and Congoto.'

Danny gave her an approving grin as he pocketed the pistol. 'Welcome to our side.' He nodded at the french windows. 'Open them – make them think that's the way we've gone.'

While the girl obeyed, Danny reached up and twisted the candelabrum. Ducking into the tunnel, he called Melanie after him. As she scrambled inside, a chiffon scarf she was wearing dropped unnoticed from her neck and caught in the panel as it pivoted closed.

A few seconds later the library door burst open. Ignoring the unconscious Kibu, Hassocks and Peyton ran to the open

windows. 'Call the house gate,' Hassocks panted. 'Get everyone looking for them. They must be stopped.'

As Peyton moved to obey, Hassocks suddenly caught his arm. His eyes had fallen on the pink chiffon scarf protruding from the panelled wall. 'Wait a moment!'

Followed by the curious Peyton, he began tapping the wall. Hearing the hollowness of the panel he glanced up, noticed the old candelabrum and began experimenting with it. After a few moments of twisting and pulling, the panel suddenly pivoted outwards. Smiling his triumph, Hassocks turned to the grinning Peyton.

'Get Jones and go in after them. We've got them trapped.'

The thin beam of Danny's pocket torch played on the mouldering walls of the tunnel. It picked out a darker archway where another tunnel crossed it at right angles. As Melanie reached the intersection a dank draught made her shiver. 'Which way?'

'He said turn left,' Danny muttered. 'Or was it right?' He wet a finger and lifted it. 'Which way's that draught coming from?'

Melanie indicated the tunnel on their right. Shining his torch Danny saw it sloped steeply downwards. 'It has to be this way. Come on.'

Stumbling over fallen bricks and rubble they came to another side tunnel fifty feet on. Seeing a narrow strip of light at the far end they hurried towards it and were rewarded by Brett's cautious whisper. 'Danny! Is that you?'

Shining his torch through the three inch crack Danny saw Brett blink and draw back. 'Yeah, it's me. What next?'

'You've taken your time,' Brett complained. 'There's a lever on your left. Pull it towards you.'

Danny's torch settled on a rusted bar fixed to a wall pivot. Handing the torch to Melanie he gave the lever a tug. There was a creaking sound and a triumphant cry from Brett. 'It's moving!'

Danny took a firmer grip and heaved. There was a snap

and a sudden yelp. A moment later a fractured piece of bar was passed through the crack to Brett. 'This the lever you wanted?' Danny asked.

Throwing away the bar in frustration Brett took a fresh grip of the slab. 'All right, let's try it the hard way. You push from your side. Ready?'

At that moment, back in the library, Peyton and another heavy, armed with pistols and flashlights, were entering the tunnel under the supervision of Hassocks. Kibu, who had recovered from Danny's punch, was standing nearby. As Peyton was about to enter, Hassocks checked him. 'Don't hesitate to shoot if they offer the slightest resistance. The stakes are too high for queasiness. You understand?'

The man nodded and hurried into the tunnel after his companion. Hassocks reached up and twisted the candelabrum. As the panel closed, he gave Kibu a triumphant smile. 'It's rather like putting ferrets in a hole to drive out rabbits, isn't it?'

The sounds from the hall had reached up to Congoto's suite and were puzzling all its occupants. Leaving Jackson to keep guard, Urquart slipped out for a moment. Returning, he motioned Jackson towards him.

'It sounds as if there's trouble down in the library. You'd better go and see if you can help. I'll take care of things here.'

Jackson ran out. Across the room Congoto and his daughter exchanged glances. Urquart shook his head.

'I shouldn't start building up your hopes. We've enough men here to take care of any emergency.' Crossing over to a table he picked up a large legal document. 'Let's try again. Why don't you stop being a hero and sign?'

Congoto, who had regained his composure, probed him. 'Supposing I did? What would there be to stop me rescinding the contract the moment I was released?'

Urquart looked almost pained. 'You can't believe we haven't thought of that. To begin with we shall keep your daughter here until it is impossible for you to go back on

your word. Then remember that you left Zanda under conditions of great secrecy. Dr Kibu arranged that a large sum of government money disappeared at the same time. If you tried to break your contract, the Press would be given certain information that would trace the missing money to you. In other words you would appear to the world as a common embezzler. I need hardly point out what capital your political enemies would make of that.'

The African nodded slowly. 'I see. And Kibu, as deputy Prime Minister, would assume my post and re-negotiate the contract.'

'Exactly. The missing money also covers us if you refuse to sign. When the news is released, it will be assumed you've fled the country and are in hiding somewhere.'

'You've been very thorough. But to ensure I don't go to the police and wreck your plans you'll have to kill me.'

Urquart gave a shrug of regret. 'That's very true. And not only you. We can hardly leave your daughter alive to incriminate us. So why not be sensible and sign?'

Jackson's heavy-jowled face wore a grin as Hassocks handed him the cellar key that Melanie had left in the library. 'So you've got that phoney butler and the girl trapped in the tunnel?'

Hassocks nodded. 'Peyton should be bringing them out at any moment. Go and fetch Sinclair. We'll decide what to do with them when we've got them all together.'

Down in the cellar the combined efforts of Brett and Danny had forced the slab open another three inches. Brett was trying to squeeze through the gap with Danny and Melanie tugging at him from the other side.

'You could lose a few pounds,' Danny complained.

Brett gave him a painful grin. 'I don't know any diet that works that fast, do you?'

At that moment the door grille slid back and Jackson's startled face appeared. Seeing Brett was half way through the opening he raised his pistol and tried to fire through the grille. The bullet struck the slab and ricocheted round the

cellar like an angry hornet. Before the man could fire again, Brett, inspired into thinness, went through the gap like a pip from an orange and cannoned into Danny.

'I think I've found that diet,' he panted. 'Come on! Let's make for the pub.'

As they fled into the darkness Jackson flung open the cellar door, ran to the half-open slab and fired a wild shot down the tunnel. He then attempted to squeeze through the gap.

Pausing, Danny fired a couple of times to delay Jackson, then scrambled after the others. They turned into a side tunnel, saw the gleam of torches, and stopped.

'They've got men in the pub passage,' Brett panted.

There was a crash of shots as Peyton and Jones saw them. Flattening against the wall, Danny fired back and saw the flashlights vanish as the two men dived for cover. The American glanced at Brett. 'We can't get past two of them!'

Brett pointed to a rubble-strewn passage ahead. 'Then the library's our only way.'

A minute later they reached the oak panelling that separated the tunnel from the library. Pushing aside the metal flap Brett peered through the spyhole. The library appeared to be empty. Nodding reassuringly to the others, he tugged on the iron lever and the panel pivoted open. Standing aside, Brett kept an eye on the tunnel behind them while Danny helped Melanie out into the room. Brett was about to follow them when he pressed hard against the side of the passageway.

Pistol in hand, Hassocks had stepped up behind Danny. The relieved Kibu was at his side. Hassocks sounded exultant. 'Flushed like a rabbit from its hole!' Without glancing back, he raised his voice. 'Well done, Peyton. You can come out now.'

There was menace in the smile the silver-haired man gave the girl. 'I'm disappointed in you, my dear. I thought you were far too ambitious to become sentimental. Now we've no option but to treat you like the others.'

Danny adopted his best Hungarian accent. 'Milord! Be so kind as to relieve Sir John of his gun.'

Before Hassocks could react, Brett came out of the open panel like a shell from a cannon. The unfortunate Hassocks was flat on his back before he knew what had hit him. In almost the same movement Brett swung a punch at Kibu. The powerfully-built African blocked the blow and fought back with surprising skill and desperation. Drawing Melanie aside, Danny commented on the fight like a ringside authority.

'You'll notice, Brett has one big handicap. He fights fair. Yeah. But keep a watch out for his right hand. Huh, huh ... here it comes ...'

Sagging from the heavy punch, Kibu sprawled out on the carpet alongside Hassocks. Hearing Jackson and the other two heavies scrambling along the tunnel, the two men grabbed Melanie and ran towards the library door. Turning to fire, Danny found his pistol was empty. Bolting after the others, he slammed the library door closed, only to discover the lock was smashed.

Staring round the hall, Danny snatched a lance from the nearby cabinet and pushed one end at Brett. Thinking as one, they held it low across the doorway as Jackson and his party came running out. As all three men tripped, Brett kicked Jackson's pistol from his hand and Danny in turn disarmed Peyton. The third man fell so heavily his pistol skidded out of sight beneath a chair but as his flailing arms threw Brett off balance, Jackson was able to break free. Snatching a ball and chain from the cabinet he swung it murderously at Brett who was just in time to grab a shield to ward off the blow. As Jackson steadied himself for another swing, Brett seized a battle axe.

A few yards away Danny and Peyton were at it hammer and tongs with two broadswords. As Jones entered the act with another sword, Brett and Danny joined back to back. For a moment, as the three heavies rained blows at them, they were very much on the defensive.

Upstairs, the sounds of the fight could be heard clearly in

Congoto's suite. Urquart was trying to keep his eyes on the African and also to keep stock of what was happening. A shout and a tremendous crash made him step into the doorway. Seeing his chance Congoto leapt forward and flung the door closed. It trapped Urquart's hand against the jamb and he dropped the pistol with a cry of pain. Grabbing it, Congoto swung down hard and Urquart sank to the floor stunned.

With Carmen at his elbow, Congoto ran out on the landing. In the hall below a savage fight was raging as the three heavies hurled blows at Brett and Danny. As Congoto started down the staircase to help them, Brett let out a rallying yell. 'Cry God for Harry, England and St George!'

Both of them lunged into the attack and the heavies scattered. A moment later the fight was over with Danny and Brett standing triumphant over their prostrate bodies. Congoto turned to Carmen with a whimsical smile.

'You know, my dear, that is the trouble with these English house parties. Nothing ever seems to happen!'

The library that evening was quiet with all the signs of battle cleared away. With eyes only for one another, Brett and Melanie were sipping champagne. Danny was standing near the fireplace, unaware in his enthusiastic reminiscences that the other two could not wait for him to leave. Waving an arm, he was demonstrating his sword fight.

'He came at me fast and low! I parried . . . we locked swords and pow . . . I had him! You know, it must have been great to live in the days when everyone went around with swords.'

Brett sighed. 'But very exhausting. Don't you feel like going to bed yet?'

'Bed? It's been exhilarating. I can go on for hours yet.' As Brett and Melanie exchanged dismayed glances, Danny stared round the library affectionately. 'It's this atmosphere. History all around . . . it makes a man feel alive.'

Brett stirred hopefully. 'Why don't you wander round? There's plenty you haven't seen.'

Danny leaned comfortably against the panelled wall. 'First thing in the morning, I will. You know something – that rallying cry of yours was great. Yeah, inspiring. Did I tell you what happened when that pug-nosed heavy came at me with the mace?'

A sudden gleam entered Brett's eyes. Crossing over to the fireplace as if to stub out his cigar, he reached down and fumbled with the old brass fittings that surrounded it. A second later there was a yell from Danny as the panel he was leaning against pivoted round and carried him from sight. Smiling blandly Brett returned to Melanie and settled amorously beside her.

'A cousin of mine was once lost for three weeks in those tunnels.'

Hand on his arm, eyes gazing into his, Melanie leaned voluptuously forward. 'You don't say?'

A muffled thumping sounded behind the wall as Brett closed in for the kill.

THE OLD, THE NEW, AND THE DEADLY

Based on the screenplay by
Brian Clemens

CHAPTER ONE

The trill of a nightingale broke the deep silence of the French countryside. Among shrubs, flowerbeds and tall trees, a stately old chateau rose against the night sky. Except for one lighted ground floor window, it stood in darkness. As a shadow crossed the oblong of light, a second nightingale broke into song from another part of the spacious grounds.

Inside the lighted room with its drapes, oil paintings and antique furniture, the owner of the chateau, Le Comte Marceau, was standing in front of the onyx marble fireplace. With an incredibly lined face he looked a very old man. Frail and stooping, he was being assisted into a coat, scarf and hat by a servant. This man was about fifty years old. Although dressed in the black garb of a butler, his height and breadth of shoulder suggested his life had been hard and physical. He was dressing the old man with a gentle, almost touching care, and yet his appearance suggested it was a care he was unlikely to extend to many.

In the elegant room, surrounded by many beautiful objects, they were an incongruous pair. The old man had not grown old gracefully: his wrinkled face looked full of evil. And for all his devotion, Verner, his manservant, looked as if compassion was absent from his make-up. As Verner dressed the old man like a parent dressing a child, the two men were listening to a record player at the far side of the room.

It was emitting a strident voice, the voice of Adolf Hitler addressing a Nuremberg rally. Rising and falling in harsh cadences, the voice was bringing from its audience all the brutish responses of an impassioned mob. The effect was that of some evil genius playing a demonical orchestra, and across the room the old man was listening with closed eyes. As the record ended he sighed and turned to Verner.

'An inspiration, Verner! A glowing inspiration.'

The man nodded as he buttoned up the old count's overcoat. 'Yes, Monsieur le Comte.' His accent was only faintly German.

'We must never forget, Verner. Never!'

Tying the scarf round the old man's throat and placing on his hat, Verner stood back to admire his handiwork. 'Never, sir.'

Satisfied, he went over to a small side table and pulled out a Luger. Checking its magazine he slipped it into Marceau's pocket and patted it into position. 'We are ready for our appointment, sir.'

The old man's reaction had the slowness of one already senile. 'Ah, yes, the appointment. Thank you, Verner.'

Verner led him across the room. At the door, the old man glanced back with rheumy eyes at the record player. 'We must never, never forget, Verner.'

Outside Verner helped him into a very old but superbly maintained Rolls Royce. A moment later, with Verner driving, the car purred down the carriage way and out onto a quiet country road.

Twenty minutes later it turned down a lane and emerged on a lonely flat stretch of ground that had once been a satellite airfield. Overgrown with bushes and long grass, the airfield's desolate appearance was aggravated by the wind that keened across it. Verner drove almost to the centre of the field and then switched off the engine. He glanced at his watch, took a pistol from a locker and then turned off the light. From the darkened windows, both men gazed silently across the field.

Ten minutes passed before Verner turned to Marceau.

Following his nod the old man saw the distant headlights of a car leave the lane and begin bumping across the field. Jumping from the car, Verner assisted Marceau to alight. Both men then moved to the front of the Rolls where, pistols hidden, they waited for the other car's approach.

It was a small French saloon. Headlights dipping to the undulations of the field, it drew closer. Watching the bright lights, neither Verner nor Marceau moved until the saloon was twenty yards away. Then the old man's cracked voice sounded above the approaching engine.

'Now!'

Both he and Verner levelled their pistols and started firing. For a moment the small car seemed to halt under the hail of bullets. Then its engine revved violently and it shot forward. Lurching, it made a screeching turn and with the driver swinging the wheel from side to side, it began to draw away. The fusillade of shots followed it but it had now gained speed and a few seconds later was out of range. With a cry of frustration the old man motioned Verner to cease firing.

'We've lost him. Did you see his face?'

Verner shook his head.

Marceau's voice was bitter. 'We played our hand too soon. We're getting rusty, Verner. Our reflexes are slowing down.'

The manservant sighed. 'It would have been wiser to allow him to alight first, sir. We could still have shot him afterwards.'

The old man ignored the gentle criticism as Verner helped him back into the car. 'Whoever he was, Verner, he has something to sell. And there are only two buyers. We'll find him again and next time we'll employ help.'

Muttering to himself, he settled in his seat. As Verner adjusted a travelling rug around his knees, he gave a cry of frustration. 'I want what that man has, Verner. I must have it!'

His anger brought on a violent spasm of coughing. The solicitous Verner helped him to recover before returning to his seat and driving the Rolls away.

* * *

The foyer of the luxurious Hotel International was busier than usual the following morning. Reporters and photographers were grouped around the street entrance and both the small tables and alcoves inside the foyer were occupied by guests and sightseers. The muted voices of waiters serving drinks were drowned by laughter and the buzz of conversation.

A man stepped out of the lift and approached the reception desk. Athletically built, wearing an expensive leather jacket, he drew the attention of two attractive girls as he walked past. Danny Wilde was as well known in Paris as on the French Riviera. With a curious glance at the busy foyer, he turned to the desk clerk.

'Hi. You got any mail for me?'

The clerk, a thinly-built Frenchman with a somewhat haughty expression, nodded. 'Oui, Monsieur Wilde. One moment please.'

The man returned a minute later with a pile of letters and a battered parcel which he set down with some distaste on the counter. It was stained and evidently leaking, and from the clerk's upturned nose smelling as well. As Danny laid one letter down and picked up another, he noticed the man's disapproving expression.

'You want something?'

The man hesitated then indicated the leaking parcel. 'If it is not impertinent to ask, monsieur, what is it?'

Danny gave the parcel a casual glance. 'Oh, that! Pickled herring, chopped liver, and a little chicken soup. My aunt Sophie sends it. If I'm not sitting in her kitchen she figures I'm starving to death.'

The man's expression was a study in bewilderment. 'Your aunt sends you food, monsieur? You!'

'Yes. You see . . .' Danny's explanation was interrupted by a stir among the newsmen and photographers in the foyer entrance. A moment later, to the eager flash of bulbs, a young man and woman appeared. The girl was dark, of medium height, and extremely beautiful. Superbly dressed

by one of Paris's leading fashion designers, she was the object of every clicking camera in the foyer. The American alongside her was tall and rugged in appearance. In his middle thirties, Frank Wager was the heir to a fortune and his marriage to Suzanne Villeigne was a Paris occasion.

With all eyes on the handsome couple, no one noticed the fifty-year-old man who was edging past the reception desk. His name was Claude Denton and in appearance he looked like a prosperous business man although a close observer would have noticed a shine on the elbows of his conservative suit. He was carrying a large despatch case and his fleshy face had a look of anticipation as he paused a few yards from the newly-arrived couple.

Danny had turned at the commotion but a photographer had blocked his view of the girl. As the man drew back he let out a loud yell of recognition.

'Suzy!'

Starting impulsively forward he collided with Denton whose eyes were also on the girl. The impact knocked the despatch case from the man's hand and as it fell it burst open, spilling out papers and an eight-inch-high bronze statuette of a German eagle on the carpet. Full of apologies, Danny ducked down to help.

'I'm sorry. Here, let me get that.'

The collision and the spilling of his case's contents had totally destroyed Denton's composure. Muttering something, he tried to push Danny away but the impulsive, apologetic American had already picked up the eagle and a batch of papers. As he straightened, the flash of a bulb made him blink and before he could turn to Denton, the man snatched the eagle and papers from him and disappeared into the crowd that had gathered near the desk. Taken aback by the man's rudeness Danny stared after him for a moment. Then, forgetting the incident, he headed towards the girl again.

'Suzy!'

This time the girl heard him and her face lit up with pleasure. 'Danny!'

Grinning broadly, Danny reached her side. 'Suzanne Villeigne. What do you know?'

The girl threw her arms around him. 'Danny! Oh, Danny, how marvellous to see you.'

Danny squeezed her a moment, then drew back. 'What are you doing here?'

The girl threw a glance at the puzzled man alongside her. 'Well, hold on tight now. Guess what?'

'You got engaged,' Danny said.

Suzanne laughed. 'I got married.' Turning, she caught her husband's arm. 'Darling, come and meet a very old friend. Danny Wilde . . . my husband . . . Frank Wager.'

Showing genuine pleasure, Danny shook the man's hand warmly. 'Congratulations! You know something – you're a lucky guy.'

Frank, who had shown some restlessness at the warmth of Danny's greeting, began to thaw. 'I know it. Suzy's told me a lot about you, Danny.'

'Don't believe a word of it,' Danny grinned. Hugging Suzanne again, Danny gave her a kiss. 'You don't mind if I kiss the bride, do you?'

This time Frank managed a smile. Behind the couple an entourage of bellboys and porters were bringing in a host of expensive suitcases. As camera bulbs flashed again Frank turned back to Danny. 'We're staying here a couple of weeks. Why don't we get together some evening?'

'Great. Whenever you want.'

'Good. Then we'll do that.' Frank took the girl's arm. 'Now let's get away from this crowd, darling.'

The girl gave Danny a bright smile as Frank steered her towards the lifts. 'See you later.'

Danny grinned after them. 'Sure. And you'd better have a good excuse why you didn't invite me to the wedding.'

He watched the couple for a moment, then turned back to the desk. As he reached for his mail, a quizzical voice sounded alongside him. 'With a bit of luck they might invite you to their honeymoon.'

The tall figure of Brett was leaning elegantly against the

counter. Complete with binoculars and shooting stick, the Englishman was dressed for an afternoon at the races in a spectacular grey jacket. Danny fingered the cloth of the jacket and then commenced a tour round the amused Brett.

'Is this the jacket you were telling me about?'

'Like it?'

'Yeah. It's nice. Great material. What's it from?'

'The tail hairs of the rare Mongolian llama,' Brett told him with some pride.

'You don't say. Well, when that midget Mongolian llama finishes weaving you a coat, maybe he'll make the purse.'

Brett eyed him coldly. 'Are you finished with the insult jokes?'

'No. I've got two more good ones.'

Brett took his shooting stick from the desk. 'Then save them for the drive. Shall we go?'

Danny handed his mail back to the clerk. 'I'll collect it later.' Falling in alongside Brett, he affected an upper-class English accent as the two men made across the foyer: 'That would be grand, my lord. Simply grand.'

They left behind them a cluster of newsmen still milling around Frank and Suzanne Wager as the couple prepared to enter a lift. No one took notice of the fleshy figure of Denton who was standing inconspicuously alongside the magazine kiosk. Holding a newspaper before him he appeared to be reading but instead was gazing with both anticipation and menace at the happy Suzanne.

CHAPTER TWO

From the crowded stand a bunch of horses could be seen racing for the finishing line. Men and women rose to their feet, urging on their favourites with excited cries. Danny and Brett, binoculars to their eyes, were among them. As the horses swept across the line, both men sank back in their

seats. Danny's voice was hollow as he tore in half his betting slips.

'I'm doing well. Four losers in a row!'

Brett grinned. 'What do you fancy for a fifth?'

As Danny examined his race card, he gave an excited start. 'Hey, will you look at that? It's an omen. A horse called Bim Bam.'

'How is that an omen?'

Danny settled back in his seat. 'Well, when I was eighteen . . .'

Brett raised an eyebrow. 'You've an enviable memory.'

'When I was eighteen,' Danny went on patiently, 'I used to go round with a girl called Bim Bam. She was big and kinda resembled a horse. So don't you see – it has to be a winner.'

'I don't see anything. Why did they call her Bim Bam?'

Danny stared at him. 'You're a real dumb-dumb, aren't you? Because her name was Mary. Don't you understand anything?'

As Danny concentrated on his race card again the man alongside Brett rose and moved away, leaving a French newspaper on his empty seat. Brett glanced at the paper casually, then picked it up and examined it more closely. His eyes were twinkling as he handed it to Danny.

'As usual, I see you got the bird.'

Danny stared down at the open newspaper. A large photograph dominated the page. It favoured Frank and Suzanne Wager but in the near background Danny was clearly seen holding the bronze eagle and the batch of letters and envelopes he had scooped up from the carpet. Claude Denton was masked from view by a newsman. Danny motioned at the French caption above the photograph. 'What's it say?'

Brett took the paper back from him. 'Suzanne Villeigne, only daughter of the infamous Marquis de Villeigne, is honeymooning in Paris after her marriage to American millionaire, Frank Wager . . .'

'Nice kid, Suzy,' Danny interrupted.

Brett's eyes lifted. 'She's an improvement on her father.'

From facetiousness, Danny suddenly became tight and defensive. 'Suzy was just a kid when all that happened. It's nothing to do with her.'

Brett shrugged. 'I was only quoting the history books.'

'History . . . that's all it is now,' Danny muttered. 'Suzy's had to live with that memory all her life. Her father's dead now and what he did ought to be forgotten.'

'Do you think any Frenchman is likely to forget?'

Danny scowled. 'All right. But Suzy can't help what he did. She's a great girl. She's . . . well, she's a nice girl, that's all.'

Surprised by Danny's reaction, Brett knew it was not a moment for flippancy. He tossed the newspaper back on the empty seat. 'Now she's married it probably will be forgotten. Or at least it will be when she goes over to the States.' He indicated Danny's race card. 'Have you picked any winners for me yet?'

Making an effort to regain his earlier mood, Danny gave him a grin. 'I've decided on a new system. We'll try to pick losers. OK?' Glancing back at his card he missed the thoughtful glance Brett was giving him.

The sounds of the summer day were coming through the open french windows of the huge sitting room as Marceau, supporting himself with his cane, hobbled towards the man standing alongside Verner. His aged voice was brittle with passion as he extended his hand.

'I want this man killed, Luther. Do you understand me?'

The man he was addressing was about thirty years old, fair-headed and neatly dressed. With a disciplined face and hard compact body, he looked both ruthless and dangerous. Although he took the newspaper the old man was offering him he did not glance at it as he nodded.

'I understand.'

Marceau's voice rose in shrill impatience. 'Look at it, man! Look at it.'

The newspaper was folded back at the photograph of Frank and Suzanne Wager. As Luther's eyes rose question-

ingly, the old man hobbled to his side and jabbed an arthritic finger.

'The man in the background. The one holding the statuette.'

Luther nodded, folded the paper, and slipped it into his jacket pocket. Marceau drew back, his eyes moving to the silent manservant.

'Verner has established that his name is Wilde. Daniel Wilde. He is staying at the Hotel International and posing as an American playboy. I want him dead. I also want that bronze eagle. I must have it! Do you understand?'

Luther shrugged. 'Simplicity itself, Monsieur le Comte.'

'I hope your confidence is justified,' the old man said curtly. 'Remember one thing. Nothing must lead back to us here.'

There was contempt in the way the man clicked his heels and gave a curt bow. 'I am not an amateur. You can depend on me.'

The count had noticed his expression and his tone changed. 'We'll have none of that heel-clicking nonsense, if you please. It was too much heel-clicking that lost us the war. I want results, Luther. Just results.'

With a half-smile Luther started for the door. Marceau's soft voice checked him. 'Luther.'

The man turned. Marceau's voice remained soft with menace. 'You show great confidence, Luther. Perhaps because you look at me and see a very old man. And perhaps because Verner is not as young as he was.'

The man's smile suggested total agreement. Marceau moved closer, his voice sibilant. 'But the old tiger is the dangerous one, Luther. When his teeth turn loose in the gums, that is when he starts to kill men. We are still dangerous, Luther.'

When the young man's expression did not change Marceau made a sign to Verner. 'Show him how dangerous we still are, Verner.'

Before Luther could react the big Verner moved with astonishing speed and drove a blow low into the man's

stomach. His fist travelled only a few inches but doubled Luther on the carpet. At the same moment the old count flicked the top of his cane and released a vicious length of blade which he held over the gasping man's throat. His expression made it very clear he was capable of using it. For a moment his small, cruel eyes stared down at the frightened Luther. Then, with an exclamation of contempt, he put the tip of the blade against the floor and pressed it back into place. His smile was both benign and evil as the gasping Luther rose from the carpet.

'Perhaps it is clearer now. Good luck, Luther.'

Verner opened the door and helped the shaken man outside. When he returned the old man was at the french windows. Supporting himself with his cane, he turned with a disdainful laugh. 'A fool, Verner.'

'Yes, sir.'

The sunlight was on Marceau's face, accentuating its wrinkles and in some odd way its evil. 'Fools are always dangerous. More than that, they become an impediment and a nuisance.'

'Yes, sir,' Verner said again.

The old man glanced at the door. 'We can afford no loose ends. Follow him, let him accomplish his work, and then end the contract.'

'Very good, sir.' Walking across the room to a table, Verner opened a drawer, took a pistol from it, and walked unhurriedly from the room.

Claude Denton walked from the lift and paused. The foyer before him had regained its customary poise. A middle-aged couple were checking in at the reception desk, with a bellboy in close attendance. A waiter was serving coffee to an elegantly-dressed man in one of the alcoves. Three women and a man chatted beside a large bowl of roses that stood on a crystal table. The muffled sound of the Paris traffic could just be heard through the ornate swing doors.

Satisfied he was unobserved, Denton crossed over to a phone near the magazine kiosk and dialled. The man in the

alcove paid him no attention. At this point Brett and Denton were unknown to one another. With a last look around him, Denton began dialling.

The lounge of the honeymoon suite upstairs was banked with flowers. Frank Wager, casually dressed in an open-necked shirt and slacks, was busy opening a bottle of champagne when the phone rang. Setting down the bottle he moved over to it.

'Hello. Hello!'

There was a click and the line went dead. As Frank stared at the receiver, Suzy came out of the bedroom. Although she was fixing her hair and had a mouthful of pins, she looked ravishing in a lime-green negligée.

'What was it, darling?'

Frank replaced the receiver. 'I don't know. Whoever it was hung up as soon as I spoke.' As he moved forward to embrace her, he grinned. 'Hey – you couldn't be two-timing me already, could you? Like "if a man answers, hang up"?'

Suzy gave a laugh. 'Frank – you're the most jealous man I've ever known.'

Frank's grin was rueful as he kissed her. 'You'd better believe it, honey.'

Downstairs, showing some annoyance, Denton was walking away from the telephone. Ahead of him a man was crossing the foyer. It was Luther, looking very calm and efficient in a well-cut brown suit. Knowing nothing of the other's involvement in his affairs, the two men went their separate ways: Denton back to his room, Luther to the alcove alongside Brett.

The man had barely seated himself when a girl's excited voice made every head in the foyer turn. 'Sin! Sin!'

The girl, who had just come through the street entrance, was young, bright, blonde, and wearing fabulous kooky clothes. Spotting Brett she was now running towards him, her face alight with pleasure. Seeing the bewilderment of the waiter serving him, Brett gave a reassuring grin. 'Don't worry. It's not an invitation. Just an abbreviation of Sinclair. Hello, Prue. You're looking gorgeous.'

The girl dropped breathlessly in the chair alongside him, gave him a kiss, and began gabbling at high speed.

'How lovely to see you, Sin. I didn't even know you were in Paris. I'm so bored . . . you'll never know how bored I've been. All the new collections are so banal this year . . .'

With a last look at the vivacious girl, the waiter moved to the adjacent table. 'Monsieur?'

'Nothing for the moment,' Luther told him. 'I'm waiting for a friend.' As the waiter nodded and began moving away, Luther pulled the newspaper out from his pocket and indicated the photograph. His tone was friendly and confidential. 'I see you've been having a little excitement here recently. These newly-weds – what's their name?'

'Mr and Mrs Wager, monsieur?'

'That's right. And I see Danny was here too.' At the waiter's puzzled expression, Luther pointed at the photograph. 'I'm not mistaken, am I. That is Danny Wilde?'

The waiter's face cleared. 'Yes, monsieur. Mr Wilde is staying here at the moment.'

'I thought it was Danny,' Luther said. 'Would you bring me a telephone.'

At the other table Brett had managed to stem Prue's torrent of words and was interjecting a few, well-chosen ones of his own. 'My suite has one of the best views of Paris you've ever seen. Let's have a drink and then I'll take you up and show you.'

The girl gave a wary giggle. 'The view's not just an excuse to get me into your room, is it, Sin?'

Before Brett could think of a suitable reply, he overheard Luther speaking into the telephone the waiter had brought. 'Hello, operator! Suite 211, please. That is Mr Daniel Wilde's suite number, isn't it?'

About to lean over and correct the mistake, Brett paused as the man went on: 'It's not! It's 405. Now how did I make a mistake like that? Wait a minute, operator – don't bother. I see Mr Wilde is just coming into the foyer.'

Glancing round for Danny, Brett could see no sign of the American. Very attentive now, he watched Luther rise from

his table. As the man turned, his jacket was pulled aside by the chair and Brett had a split-second glimpse of a shoulder holster. Beside him Prue was repeating her question.

'You haven't answered me, Sin. Is the view an excuse?'

His mind fully occupied with Luther, Brett was already on his feet. 'Of course,' he said absentmindedly.

Prue blinked up at him. 'But you know I'm not that kind of a girl! . . .'

Brett was already hurrying away. 'I'll have to go. Stay here and I'll tell you over the telephone what the view looks like.'

The bewildered girl watched him hurry after Luther. Her comment as she lit a cigarette was rueful. 'I may not be that kind of girl, Brett Sinclair, but the least you could do was try to persuade me.'

The lift doors opened sibilantly. Glancing down the corridor, Luther saw to his satisfaction that it was empty. Walking as though he were a guest returning to his room, he paused outside the door numbered 405. Through it Danny's muffled voice could be heard raised in song. Smiling, Luther drew his automatic from its holster and holding it flat by his side, pressed the buzzer.

Inside the suite Danny was taking a shower. The hiss of the water and the operatic aria he was rendering were keeping the decibels up, but as the American took in breath for a high note he heard the buzzer. Wrapping a towel around himself, he entered the empty lounge. 'Who is it?'

The buzzer sounded again, long and urgent. Shrugging, Danny started towards the door. 'If you're a female over fifty, close your eyes. If you're not, come right in.'

Opening the door he stared without recognition at Luther. 'Yes?'

'Mr Wilde?'

'Yes. What can I do for you?'

Without another word Luther brought up the silenced pistol and levelled it at Danny's chest. As his finger tightened on the trigger Brett, who had been running on tip-toe down

the corridor, took a desperate crash dive and carried Luther out of Danny's sight. As both men cannoned into an abandoned food tray, there was a tremendous crash of glass. The impact separated them and Luther, the first to recover, bolted for an exit door at the end of the corridor. Grabbing the pistol he had dropped, Brett went after him. Less than eight seconds from the moment he had opened his door, Danny was staring down an empty corridor, with only the smashed trolley and the swinging exit door to indicate anything untoward had happened. His muttered voice emphasized his bewilderment. 'I'm sure that somewhere there's a reasonable explanation for all this!'

Doors began opening and alarmed guests appeared in the corridor. Their stares reminded the dismayed Danny of his appearance and he began backing towards his door. 'I'm, er, I'm auditioning for Tarzan,' he offered. When the stares continued he gave a Tarzan-like cry and dived for his room where reaction caught up with him and he leaned shaking against the door.

In a garbage-strewn alley at the back of the hotel a door burst open and Luther dashed out. He had barely negotiated a couple of dustbins when Brett appeared and gave chase. Running out into a narrow street lined with cars, Luther was making for Marceau's old Rolls Royce when Brett took another headlong dive and caught his ankles.

The two men rolled over and over on the pavement. In the fierceness of their struggle, neither man noticed the front window of the Rolls wind down or the silenced pistol that Verner was levelling. Brett, who was trying to get an arm lock on Luther, felt him suddenly crumple. As he sagged face down on the pavement Brett saw the bullet hole in his back. Behind Brett the old Rolls Royce pulled out from the kerb and drew away. Its passage was so unhurried and normal that it made little impact on Brett who, seeing no sign of a gunman, bent over Luther and began searching his pockets. Pulling out the newspaper he discovered it was folded at the photograph of Frank and Suzanne Wager, with Danny in the background. Ignoring the half-hysterical

spectators who were gathering around, Brett was gazing at the photograph when a police siren wailed and a car screeched up alongside him. A moment later a hand came down roughly on his shoulder.

'You will come with us, monsieur. At once!'

CHAPTER THREE

Danny fell into step alongside Brett as the Englishman came out of the police prefecture. 'So what happened? Did they give you the treatment? The bright lights and the rubber hose?'

Brett yawned. 'Certainly not. It was all very urbane and civilized. We had a glass of rather inferior wine and I explained how I came to be dancing with a dead man in the street.'

'And they believed you?'

Brett stared at him. 'Of course.'

Danny, shaken by the attempted assassination, was suffering one of his bouts of egalitarianism. 'Of course they believed you. And why? Because you're a belted earl. Now if it had been some ordinary guy off the streets . . .'

He received a raised eyebrow. 'You sound as if you wanted them to put me away.'

'It's not that at all. It's the principle of the thing.'

Brett indicated a flight of steps that ran down to the embankment of the Seine. The sun was warm and in their summer dresses a party of girls looked like bright butterflies as they sat draped on a stone bench. Brett's eyes were twinkling as he led Danny downwards.

'There's just one small thing you've forgotten.'

'What's that?'

'I didn't shoot him. Remember?'

'Oh, all right,' Danny conceded. 'Now will you explain to me? Who was that guy?'

'His name was Siegfried Luther. And he had a record.'

'Did it get into the Hit Parade?'

Brett's look was withering. 'That's a terrible joke.'

'I know. Total strangers trying to kill me does take the edge off my sense of humour!'

Brett brightened. 'Perhaps that's it. Someone's heard you telling jokes and feels it's the only kind thing to do.'

'Oh, funny, funny.'

Brett indicated the sunlit river alongside them. 'While we're here, why not save them the trouble? I can always pretend it was an accident.'

'I'd be insane!' At Brett's stare, Danny went on somewhat sheepishly: 'Insane . . . inSeine . . . Get it?'

'You appear to have cornered the market in bad jokes,' Brett said coldly. He turned to stare after a pretty girl in a mini-dress, then glanced back at the American. 'Let's see if this cheers you up. The chances are there was absolutely nothing personal in Luther's wanting to kill you.'

'Oh, fine,' Danny said sarcastically. 'Great . . . I mean that makes a big difference. Listen, you English dumb-dumb, what's more personal than a bullet between the eyes. My eyes!'

'Will you listen,' Brett asked patiently. 'The police believe Luther was a hired gun.'

Danny stiffened and halted. 'Hired gun? You mean somebody's paying to have me dead?'

Brett shrugged. 'Of course it might have been a mistake.'

'No. He asked for me by name.'

Brett frowned and began walking again, faster this time. 'So there's something we have to face. They failed this time but they could send someone else. You'd better get back to your room and stay there.'

The telephone in the Wager's suite rang that evening while Suzanne was writing postcards. Looking attractive in a long, casual dress she jumped to her feet and crossed over to the small table on which the phone rested. Her voice was bright and uninhibited as she lifted the receiver.

'Hello. Yes, Suzanne Wager speaking. Sorry, could you speak up, please.'

Her expression turned into one of fear as she listened. She threw a nervous glance at the open bedroom door before replying in a tone that was now low and tense.

'Hello. But I can't! ... Not now. No ... please. It's impossible. Hello! Hello!'

Looking upset, the girl lowered the receiver. A sound from the bedroom door made her start. Frank, fixing his tie, walked towards her. 'Who was that?'

She managed a smile. 'That? Oh, just a wrong number.'

'We seem to be getting more than our share of wrong numbers,' he said, watching her. 'Maybe I ought to complain to the switchboard.'

Making no comment, Suzy returned to her chair. Fiddling with her correspondence for a moment, she turned back to Frank.

'I seem to be out of postcards.'

He moved immediately towards the telephone. 'I'll call room service for you.'

She moved hastily towards the door. 'No, don't bother. I'll pop down to the kiosk in the foyer. It won't take me a moment.'

His voice checked her as she was going out. 'Suzy.'

She answered without looking back. 'Yes.'

'Are you all right, darling?'

This time she turned and forced another smile. 'Of course I am. I couldn't be happier.'

As she ran out Frank moved thoughtfully towards her chair. Four postcards were lying on the top of her writing case. He picked them up and flicked through them. Three were unused.

Out in the corridor Suzy had broken into a run. To her relief the lift was waiting and as she pressed the button the doors opened immediately. There was a middle-aged man with a fleshy face standing at the rear of the lift but in her preoccupation the girl hardly noticed him. It was only when

the doors closed and the lift began to descend that his voice made her start and spin round.

'Good evening, Mrs Suzanne Wager. You are expecting to meet me in the foyer but in my line of business the unexpected is safer.'

'Who are you?' the girl demanded.

The man reached out and pressed the halt button. 'My name is unimportant. It is you that matters. The daughter of the infamous Marquis de Villeigne. What do Frenchmen call him – the Great Traitor? The man who sold France to the Germans?'

The girl was pale with fear and anger. 'That's not true. My father betrayed no one.'

She received a mocking smile. 'That is not what the world believes.'

'I don't care what the world believes. I knew my father and I know he was innocent.'

'But I know you do care. I know you would give your right arm to establish his innocence.' As the girl stared at him, Denton gave a mocking bow. 'Yes; it can be done. Of course it will cost a great deal of money but then you have a very rich husband.'

Suzanne gave a start. 'I wouldn't ask him for money. I couldn't.'

Denton released the lift and pressed a button that halted it on the second floor. As the doors slid open, he turned back to her. 'Think about it, my dear. I'll be in touch very soon.' As she started after him, he pushed her back. 'No; don't try to follow me. I'm an old hand and it would be a waste of time.'

The girl stood staring after him. When he disappeared she turned to the control panel, intending to return to her suite. Then her hand wandered to button four. Hesitating a moment, she pressed it.

Thirty seconds later she stepped out on the corridor that led to Danny's rooms. A tray stood outside the door numbered 405 – Danny was taking Brett's advice seriously and was keeping out of circulation. Suzanne reached the door,

raised her hand to knock, and paused. Twice she made the attempt and each time changed her mind at the last moment. Finally, biting her lips, she turned and walked dejectedly back to the lift.

She did not notice the man watching her from the swing doors at the other end of the corridor. To Frank Wager, who had just arrived up the rear steps, it appeared she was just leaving Danny's flat.

The old Rolls Royce purred unobtrusively down the narrow street at the rear of the hotel and parked behind a small Renault. Switching off the engine Verner reached into the locker and pulled out the silenced pistol. Face grim and determined, he climbed from the car and glanced upwards. Silhouetted against the lighted windows, the fire escape could be seen zig-zagging dizzily into the night sky. Slipping the pistol into his pocket, Verner started to climb.

At the front of the hotel Brett was ushering Prue from the street into the luxurious foyer. After a night out in town, both were bubbling with high spirits. The girl squeezed Brett's arm affectionately as they crossed over to the lifts.

'Sin, darling, you do understand that I'm only coming to your room for the view?'

Brett's glance was innocence itself. 'Of course. What other reason could there be?'

'Well, some chaps might take advantage of a girl,' Prue suggested.

Brett raised a shocked eyebrow. 'Really.'

'And the only defence a girl has got is her scream.'

Brett winced. 'And you've a loud scream?'

The girl suppressed a giggle. 'No. The truth is I've had rather a sore throat all day.'

Brett lifted his eyes gratefully as he led her into a lift. As it halted on the fourth floor and they started down the corridor, she turned to him. 'If I told you I'd never been to a man's room on my own before, would you believe me?'

'Of course,' Brett said solemnly. 'As long as you believe I've never asked a woman to my rooms before.'

This time Prue did giggle. 'Touché.'

Brett halted her as they drew level with Danny's door. 'I just want to check on something,' he said, tapping on it.

Danny's voice sounded. 'Who is it?'

'Brett.'

Danny opened the door and peered out somewhat nervously.

'OK?' Brett asked.

Danny nodded. 'OK.' Reacting to Prue's good looks, he glanced enquiringly at Brett. 'OK?'

'OK,' Brett said.

Giving a 'go to it' look, Danny withdrew and closed his door. 'OK?' Prue asked Brett tentatively.

Brett grinned as he led her to the next door down the corridor. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

From the fire escape outside, the closed curtains made it impossible to gain a glimpse into Danny's suite. Crouched by the window, Verner opened a thin-bladed knife and slipped it into the joint alongside the lock. As he moved and twisted it with professional skill, the lock suddenly gave. Opening the window with immense care, Verner reached forward and fractionally parted the curtains. Although his view of the lounge was restricted, he could see Danny slumped in an armchair reading a magazine. Nodding his satisfaction, Verner drew the pistol from his pocket and slid the barrel between the curtains. Steadying one arm with the other, he drew a bead on the American and squeezed the trigger.

There was a muffled plop. Danny, a look of astonishment on his face, remained upright but Verner saw there was a neat black hole in the centre of the American's forehead. Satisfied, he parted the curtains and jumped into the room, only to halt with a grunt of dismay.

The figure he had fired at was Danny's reflection in a full-length mirror at the right hand side of the room. The high-velocity bullet had drilled a neat hole in the glass. Before Verner could recover from his surprise, Danny launched himself from his chair and hit him waist high. The impact knocked the pistol from the man's hand and it fell to the

carpet. Fighting with a strength born of desperation, the two men crashed into a table which splintered under the weight of their bodies.

Breaking free, Danny swung a punch that sent Verner reeling back. The man fell a few feet from the pistol and managed to snatch it up before Danny dived on him. Unable to fire it, Verner used it as a club and delivered a stunning blow to the side of the American's head. Dazed, Danny sank to his knees. Climbing to his feet Verner stood back and aimed the pistol at the helpless American.

In the suite next door Brett was busy pouring drinks. Prue was draped glamorously and seductively on a large settee. Brett gave her a grin over his shoulder.

'Nervous?'

She looked puzzled. 'Should I be?'

'Your first visit to a man's room alone,' he pointed out.

'Oh, that. No. I suppose it's because I trust you.'

'Don't,' Brett warned.

She gave a sigh of pleasure, reached out to the lamp at the head of the settee and switched it off. 'Lots of ice in mine, Sin,' she murmured. 'I'm feeling very warm tonight.'

Brett's smile as he reached for the ice cubes was that of a cat being offered a bowl of cream. As he turned to her, holding a glass in either hand, there was the muffled crash of furniture from the suite next door. Reacting immediately, Brett dropped both glasses and broke into a run. The settee lay between him and the door, and Prue, who had not heard the disturbance, believed his sudden charge was due to unrestrained passion. Terrified, she drew back. 'Easy, Sin! Easy!...'

Brett kept coming. As the girl let out another squeal, he vaulted over the settee and dashed outside. As the astonished Prue stared at the open door, he raced down the corridor and crashed into Danny's suite. The door, hurled open, struck Verner just as he was about to pull the trigger and the pistol was again knocked from his hand.

Brett's high-speed entry brought his shins in contact with an over-turned chair and for a moment he was hurt. Verner,

quick to seize his opportunity, ran to the window and down the fire escape. By the time Brett had recovered and reached the window it was clear that a chase would be futile. Turning, he helped the groggy Danny into a chair.

'You didn't tell me you were having a party. Are you all right?'

Rubbing his head, Danny gave him a painful grin. 'You kidding? Is a broken skull fatal?'

Brett went round the room picking up overturned furniture. 'Twice in one day. Someone is awfully determined.'

'But why?' Danny pleaded. 'Why me?'

Brett shrugged. 'Perhaps it's going to be an annual event. Like Father's and Mother's Day. Only this is "National Let's Kill Danny Wilde Week".'

Danny scowled. 'Well I'll tell you something. I'm not going to sit waiting for it any longer. I've got to know why.'

'I wouldn't blame you at that.' Brett examined the American's head and stepped back. 'You'll live. It's no more cracked than usual. Mind if I go now? No one's likely to try anything again tonight and I've got a guest next door.'

Danny nodded. 'I'm not going to do much sleeping, anyway.'

Brett paused at the door. 'Just one thing. If you do get yourself killed, try to keep it nice and quiet, will you? You're playing havoc with my love life.'

He received a crooked grin. 'Yeah, I'll try. Brett, listen ... Thanks.'

Brett gave him a wink and moved out. Locking the door Danny went thoughtfully to the window and checked it was closed. He was bathing his head when the door buzzer sounded. He gave a start, then turned grim and purposeful. Tip-toeing across the lounge he picked up the pistol Verner had dropped. He then crossed to the door, took a deep breath and put his hand on the catch.

CHAPTER FOUR

The muffled ringing of the telephone brought Suzanne awake with a start. Glancing fearfully at Frank, she waited for a reaction but his even breathing convinced her he was still asleep. Slipping quietly out of bed, her bare feet silent on the carpet, she tip-toed forward and closed the bedroom door behind her. She then ran to the phone and snatched it up. 'Hello. Who is it?'

The soft voice that greeted her was full of satisfaction. 'I'm sorry if I woke you up, Mrs Wager, but I felt it best to give you time to think. Are you interested? You are? – I felt you would be. Then just be patient and you will soon receive your instructions.'

In spite of her need for caution, the girl's voice rose. 'But can't you tell me more now? Please. Hello. Hello.'

Once again Denton had rung off. With a cry of exasperation, Suzanne replaced the receiver. For a full minute she stood motionless. Then, making a decision, she crept back into the bedroom. The darkness prevented her seeing Frank's eyes close as he simulated sleep. Not wishing to open her wardrobe in case the sound might disturb Frank, the girl could find no more substantial covering than a flimsy negligée she had thrown over a chair earlier. Slipping it on, she tip-toed back into the sitting room and out into the corridor.

Frank lay listening for another fifteen seconds. Then he jumped up, threw on a dressing gown, and followed Suzanne outside.

His hand on the door catch, Danny could feel the fast beating of his heart. Gripping the pistol tightly, he jerked the door open. Expecting the worst, he gaped at the girl in the flimsy negligée standing there.

'Suzy!'

The girl moved forward pleadingly. 'Danny! You've got to help me. Please!'

Danny edged back. 'Sure. But steady. It's late and ...'

Suzanne followed him inside. 'I can't tell Frank,' she explained. 'At least not until I'm certain what it's all about. I somehow don't think he'd understand.'

Danny had now had time to take in her distraught appearance. 'You're shaking! What is it? That husband of yours been beating you up?'

She tried to smile but instead lost control. Before Danny could defend himself, her pleading arms were around him. 'Danny, please help me. There's no one else ...'

Throwing caution to the winds, Danny pressed her tearful face into his shoulder and made comforting sounds. Then his eyes lifted and froze. Face thunderblack, Frank was standing in the doorway. Before anyone could speak, the American yanked Suzanne aside and landed an outraged punch on Danny's jaw. Danny gave a yell of protest, reeled back, and sat down glassy-eyed in a chair. Frank dragged Suzanne into the corridor, then glared back.

'I've heard about your reputation, Wilde. Until now I've thought it was probably only idle gossip. But now ... You stay away from my wife or I'll take you clean apart.'

In the suite next door Brett and Prue were resuming where they had left off. Together on the settee, their faces only a foot apart, they were gazing into each other's eyes. As Prue gave a sigh, Brett moved forward for the kill, only to hear Danny's muffled yell. To Prue's amazement his face went on past her own as he vaulted over the settee again and rushed outside. He was in time to see Frank dragging a protesting Suzanne down the corridor. Running into Danny's suite he found the American rising from his chair, one hand pressed against his jaw.

'Not again,' Brett said, relaxing.

By this time Danny appeared almost philosophical. 'No. This was just a social smash on the jaw. You know – between friends. The way things looked, I'd probably have done the same myself.'

Brett raised an eyebrow as he examined the American's jaw. 'You're growing remarkably tolerant in your old age.'

An angry voice sounded behind him. 'Brett Sinclair, I hate you!'

Turning, Brett was just in time to glimpse the blow Prue was throwing him. Ducking neatly, he heard a hard slap and winced. As Prue stalked out, very much on her dignity, he turned to Danny whose hand had now moved from his jaw to his cheek. The American's voice contained more sadness than anger.

'Yeah. That figures too. Would you just take a quick look outside? I mean, see if there's anyone else who wants to hit me?'

Brett led him sympathetically to an armchair. 'It's not been one of our better days,' he agreed. 'What about a drink?'

Outside the chateau the resident nightingale was creating an illusion of tranquillity. Inside the ornate room the atmosphere was very different. Standing with head bowed, Verner was receiving the full impact of Marceau's recrimination.

'You are an incompetent fool, Verner. It was stupid and it was ill-planned. It might have endangered everything we have worked for.'

Verner's expression made it obvious the old man's anger was hurting him. 'I wanted to make up for my earlier failure, sir.'

The old man sneered. 'And instead you made another. It was an emotional judgement – and such judgements are always suspect. In future you'll only act at my express command. Is that clear?'

As Verner, dog-like in his obedience, nodded, Marceau's temper began to cool. 'Fortunately the situation is not irremediable. I have brought in the help we need.'

Verner looked up. 'May I know who?'

'Groski,' Marceau told him.

A look of alarm crossed Verner's face and for the first time it seemed he might protest. 'Groski!'

'Why not?' the old man demanded. 'He's good. We both know that.'

'He's a savage,' Verner muttered.

Marceau shrugged his frail shoulders. 'But still good. He takes pride in his work. The sort of pride we took in the old days. He is one of us, Verner.'

Thirty years of obedience killed Verner's rebellion at birth, although his sigh was heard across the room. 'When does he arrive?'

The old man gave a dry chuckle and indicated a high-backed chair near the fireplace. 'He is here now.'

As Verner turned, a man rose from the chair. Tall, slim, dressed in an expensive dark suit, he was smiling a smile that had no correlation with happiness. Groski always smiled and never more than when he was killing men. His soft voice crossed the room like a cold draught.

'You call me a savage and yet you – both of you – blunder and wallow about like cattle in a field.' His pale eyes were on Verner as he went on: 'A bringer of death should be an artist. A victim has only one life so, when the end comes, it should be an occasion.'

The old man's impatience was an effort to control the man's powerful personality. 'Yes, yes, yes, we all know your views. I want to hear how you intend handling this man Wilde.'

Groski lit a gold-tipped cigarette. 'Let me clearly understand your problem. This man has a certain object that you desperately want . . .'

Marceau nodded eagerly. 'You've seen the photograph.'

Groski continued as if he had not been interrupted. 'And the possession of this object gives him knowledge that is dangerous to you. Therefore he must be silenced.'

'Precisely.'

Groski exhaled smoke. 'Then the matter is simple.' He threw a curt glance at Verner. 'Get him on the telephone!' As Verner moved to obey, Groski turned back to Marceau.

'I will issue an invitation that he cannot refuse. Certain employees of mine will offer him an irresistible sum of money. He will bring the object to me and the moment it is in my hands I shall personally ensure his silence.'

Before the eager old man could reply, Verner held out the receiver. 'His phone is ringing now.'

Groski put it to his ear. After a moment, he purred softly into it. 'Mr Wilde? Please listen closely to what I have to say. The attempts on your life have not yet ended. Those concerned will try again. Are you still there, Mr Wilde?'

In his suite Danny was urgently motioning Brett to come closer and listen. 'Yeah. I'm still here.' As Brett reached his side, Danny half-turned the receiver so that Brett could hear the confident Groski's reply.

'Good. Then I have a proposition for you. Do business with me and your worries about your life will be ended. And you will find my terms most generous. The figure I have in mind is one hundred thousand francs. Does my proposition interest you?'

Danny exchanged a look with Brett before replying. 'It sounds very reasonable. Just give me the time and place.' The American listened, then glanced at his watch. 'In an hour? Don't worry, I'll find it.'

At the other end of the line the smiling Groski straightened. 'And I will find you, Mr Wilde. Au revoir.'

Replacing the receiver he turned towards the attentive men. 'He agreed?' the Count asked excitedly.

'Of course. Wouldn't any man who has had two attempts made on his life?' Groski's tone changed, became impressively businesslike. 'I have very little time. The purchase must look genuine, so please let me have the money. It will be returned to you when the affair is completed.'

Marceau nodded and gave instructions to Verner, who hurried from the room. Glancing at the old man, Groski turned back to the telephone. 'You will excuse me now. I must brief my assistants.'

The bronze Aston Martin glided through the narrow Paris

streets and halted outside a garishly-lit night club. As Brett glanced at him, Danny nodded. 'That's it.'

Brett, who was still wearing dinner dress, opened the car door. 'I'll go in first. Give me a couple of minutes and then you follow. Remember – you don't know me.'

He glanced back as he reached the door beneath the neon sign. Danny was still inside the car. Brett eyed the murky entrance with distaste, then, taking a deep breath, pushed the door open. Pausing in a tatty lobby to pay a preposterous entrance fee, he descended a flight of steps into a large cellar whose décor was borrowed from old horror movies. Skulls, with candles burning inside them, grinned from niches in the walls. Vampires and ghouls sat among cobwebs in the ceiling rafters, their glass eyes winking evilly in the psychedelic lights.

The music was very far out. Although the floor was thick with dancers, no one appeared to be dancing with anyone and there was little conversation. With hair long and the lighting psychedelic, the easiest way of recognizing the girls from the boys was by their grotesque white make-up.

Brett found an unoccupied chair and sat down. Two sensationally-dressed girls were at the adjacent table. Feeling very much out of place, Brett saw them staring at him. He gave an uncomfortable smile. 'Er, good evening.'

One of the girls rose and approached him. Pausing a few feet away she examined him as if he were a freak from a circus. Then her heavily made-up eyes moved towards the dancers and she jerked her head. Grinning, Brett rose.

'Enchanted. I've always enjoyed the old-fashioned waltz.'

Without a word the girl began a gyrating routine that totally ignored Brett. He watched her for a moment and then, with a shrug, began gyrating himself. A minute later his attention was drawn to an attractive girl sitting alone at a side table. Wearing a short slim-fitting dress, she appeared to be watching the cellar entrance. A couple of wriggling hippies hid her for a moment and when she appeared again she was on her feet. Following her gaze, Brett saw Danny on the cellar stairs.

The girl pushed forward. Danny, trying to adjust to the psychedelic lighting, was descending the stairs somewhat cautiously. As he reached the floor the girl ran up and kissed him. At the same moment her hands slid swiftly down his body. Her low voice had an approving note as she drew back. 'You're not carrying a gun. I'm glad.'

Danny was eyeing her clinging dress that could not possibly have concealed anything but her. 'What makes you so sure?'

She smiled. 'My name is Serena. And you are Danny Wilde. Shall we sit down?'

'Unless you want to frisk me again,' Danny said hopefully.

Taking his hand she led him to her table. 'I hope you do not mind this place. But we thought you would rather do business where there are plenty of people around.'

Danny was eyeing her revealing dress again. 'How wrong can you be?'

His banter was clearly pleasing the girl. 'You wouldn't have been suspicious if we had picked an isolated spot?'

Danny leaned across the table. 'Are you absolutely sure you don't want to frisk me again?'

With a last smile, the girl suddenly became businesslike. 'Have you got it?'

Danny tapped his inside pocket. 'Yeh. It's here.'

Serena looked surprised. 'I thought it would be quite bulky.'

'Bulky? How bulky could it be?'

The girl stared at him. 'I don't know. I've never seen it.'

Looking equally puzzled, Danny shrugged. 'It doesn't take up much room. Anyway, I've got it.'

Satisfied, Serena reached beneath the table and drew out a thick foolscap envelope. 'Here is our side of the deal. You'll find it is all there.'

Totally mystified now, Danny reached for the envelope but the girl drew it sharply back. 'What about your side of it?'

Reaching inside his jacket, Danny drew out a similar

foolscap envelope. Cautiously the two reached out so that each could snatch the other's envelope at the same time. Tearing his acquisition open, Danny gave a yelp of astonishment. 'This is just money!'

Across the table the girl was showing equal mystification. 'So is this.'

They stared at one another, then the girl gave a cry of exasperation. 'Our lines are crossed somewhere. What are you selling?'

'I'm not selling anything,' Danny said. 'I'm buying.'

Serena shook her head vehemently. 'No. *I'm* buying.'

With a desperate effort to bring order out of chaos Danny held up his hands. 'Wait, wait, wait. I'll go out and come back in and we'll start all over again with you frisking me. Right?'

All the girl's confidence had evaporated as she rose to her feet. 'Just stay here,' she told Danny. 'Don't move.'

She reached down to pick up both envelopes but Danny's hand pinned them to the table. 'If I'm staying, so are these.'

With her composure in shreds the girl hesitated, then made for the darkened rear of the club. Brett, who had worked his way round the floor, questioned Danny from the side of his mouth. 'What's happening?'

Danny replied without glancing at him. 'I've just met the most beautiful frisker. We might get engaged.'

Giving him a hard look, Brett gyrated out of range. A few seconds later the tall figure of Groski appeared. Without a word he sat opposite Danny and spread a newspaper on the table. His cold eyes studied it carefully and then rose to the American's face. Satisfied that Danny and the man in the photograph were the same person, he sat back in his chair.

'I gather there has been some kind of misunderstanding,' he said softly.

Very alert, Danny shrugged. 'I came here to talk to a man who said he knew who was trying to kill me. I'm willing to pay for that information.'

Across the cellar Brett had resumed his seat alongside the

two girls and had his eyes on Serena. She had emerged from the rear of the club with Groski and was now talking to two young men. Although wearing long hair and dressed like the club customers, they looked hard and physical and Brett guessed their purpose. One sidled through the dancers and took station near Danny's table. The other climbed the cellar stairs to cover the only exit.

Assessing Danny with his cold stare, Groski leaned over the table. 'Whereas my purpose, Mr Wilde, is to buy the bird from you.'

Danny blinked hard. 'Bird! What bird?'

The American's bewilderment was so genuine that Groski began to show doubt for the first time. He pushed the newspaper across the table. 'The statuette you are holding in your hand.'

Danny gave a start. 'Oh, that! It isn't mine. I bumped into a guy and picked it up for him.'

With a sigh of understanding, Groski sat back. 'So it has been a mistake. Those amateurs never checked you.' His lack of emotion as he picked up his money added to his air of menace. 'Unfortunately it is an error that must be rectified.'

Danny hurriedly rose. 'Sorry we couldn't do business. I'll have to get along now. I've got a date and . . .'

The man's soft voice interrupted him. 'Sit down, Mr Wilde. I'm holding a gun beneath the table.'

Danny lowered himself gingerly. 'You wouldn't like to talk the thing over?'

'I'm afraid not, Mr Wilde. You already know too much.'

Danny blinked again. 'I do!!'

'I'm afraid so. Do understand I don't enjoy causing pain, Mr Wilde. I shall see you are silenced as painlessly as possible.'

'Don't grab me,' Danny muttered, picking up his money.

'Keep silent and listen. Rise slowly to your feet and make for the stairs. Remember you will be covered all the way.'

As Danny obeyed he saw the young heavy, his hand in his pocket, come up alongside Groski. As both men followed

the American through the gyrating dancers, Brett left his table and made for the stairs. The gunman stationed there stood aside for him and Brett disappeared through the door.

Danny was half a dozen yards from the stairs when he suddenly tore open his envelope and threw a wad of notes into the air. As they fluttered down a girl dancer let out a squeal of excitement. Before either Groski or his henchman could react, a rush of dancers hurled them aside and began scrabbling for the money. Shoving forward, Danny tossed a second wad of notes into the air and bolted for the stairs. He was halfway up when the man guarding the door pulled out a pistol and forced him to halt.

Trapped, Danny glanced desperately over his shoulder. Groski and the other heavy, hitting out viciously, were almost free of the milling dancers. As the American turned back he saw Brett slip back through the door. A second later the gunman stiffened as Brett dug a knuckle in his back. As he lifted his hands Danny jumped forward and dropped him with a punch to the jaw. By this time Groski and the other gunman were free and bounding up the stairs. Grabbing the unconscious heavy, Brett and Danny hurled him bodily into them. As all three men crashed heavily to the floor, Brett turned coolly. 'Shall we go?'

'Wait a minute,' Danny panted. Running down the steps he grabbed the bulky envelope from the half-stunned Groski's pocket. Bounding back he gave Brett a wicked grin and disappeared with him through the door.

At the foot of the steps all three men were recovering from their fall. Groski was dabbing his mouth with a handkerchief. As one of the heavies bent down to see if the man needed help, he drew back sharply at the malevolence in the face that glared up at him.

'A farce,' Groski snarled. 'Stupidity that made me look foolish.'

He was facing both Verner and Marceau. A shaft of morning sunlight was slanting across the room between them.

Verner's face was expressionless but the old man was showing markedly less respect for Groski since hearing of the previous night's failure.

'We both regret it. But after seeing the photograph, it was logical to believe Wilde had the statuette. You believed it yourself.'

'I believed it because I thought you had carried out a check. In my work I need facts, not assumptions.'

The old man hobbled forward. Perhaps because of its puppet-like appearance his frail figure looked malevolent. 'And I need assistance, Groski, not criticism. We have lost time and now we must move quickly.' He glanced at Verner who nodded hesitantly.

'But move where, sir? We don't know the identity of the man who has the statuette.'

Supporting himself with his cane, the count moved towards a window. It was a full fifteen seconds before his ageing voice reached the two men. 'Perhaps not. But we do know there are only two people in the world who would be interested in purchasing it. Myself and . . .'

Groski was quick to snatch the point. 'The daughter of the Marquis de Villeigne!'

Smiling at his own cleverness, Marceau turned. 'Precisely. We must make certain that when this man approaches her, we are not far away.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Chin in hand, Danny stared gloomily across the table in his suite at Brett who was eating a hearty breakfast.

'You hungry?'

Brett poured himself another cup of coffee. 'Yes.' He nodded at the American's untouched plate. 'What's wrong with you?'

'I can't think,' Danny said sarcastically. 'Can you?'

'You should eat something, you know. It'll give you more resistance if they should catch up with you.'

Danny's mood could not sustain the banter. 'A bird,' he muttered. 'That's what the whole thing is about. A bronze bird.'

Brett helped himself to another piece of toast. 'That's the seventh time you've said that.'

'Eighth,' Danny grunted. 'But who's counting? The bird is the whole reason they're trying to kill me.'

'Which only goes to prove how dangerous it is to pick up strange birds.'

Danny let the quip pass. 'What makes it worse, it's just a case of mistaken identity.'

'Do you know something,' Brett said, munching toast. 'I once had an ancestor who was mistaken for someone else.'

'I thought you might have,' Danny said bitterly.

'The Marquis of Castlehay. Of course it was years ago. At the time of the French Revolution.'

'I don't want to hear about it.'

Brett continued unperturbed. 'He was doing the European Grand Tour with his wife. They arrived in Paris and suddenly their carriage was surrounded by angry peasants. Now unfortunately my cousin bore an uncanny resemblance to the King's cousin, and before he could identify himself, the mob dragged him off to the guillotine.'

Danny had become absorbed in spite of himself. 'You're saying that actually happened?'

Brett nodded. 'His head was on the block and the blade was ready to fall. Just at that moment his wife fought her way through the crowd and explained the mistake.'

'She saved his life,' Danny said eagerly.

'No. She couldn't speak French. However, she married again shortly afterwards.'

Danny gave a groan and sank back. Finishing his breakfast with a flourish, Brett became businesslike. 'With the inner man satisfied, let's get down to solving this affair.'

'I'd appreciate a little help, Sherlock.'

Reaching out, Brett drew the newspaper towards him. 'All right. The facts. You knocked into a man.'

'Right. His briefcase fell open and I helped pick up his things.'

'And got photographed in the process.'

'Holding the bird,' Danny added.

'Then it makes sense that the man they really want is the man you helped?'

'Great thinking,' was Danny's sarcastic comment.

Brett pushed the photograph over. 'Which one is he?'

The long-suffering Danny pointed to the tip of a shoe. Its owner was hidden by a newsman. 'That's him. Think you'd recognize him in a crowd?'

'But *you* saw him,' Brett pointed out. 'And he's the key to the whole thing.'

'I saw him for about ten seconds. And most of that time I had my eyes on Suzy. You think I'm going to find him again – among all the millions in Paris?'

Brett suddenly snatched back the photograph. 'Wait a minute . . . I saw a movie once.' Staring closely at the photograph, he gave a grin of triumph. 'I think I've got it.'

'Got what?' Danny asked blankly.

Brett jumped to his feet and hurried across the suite. 'Come on. You and me have a man to see.'

Looking resentful, Frank came out of the bedroom. 'Well! Are you going to give me an explanation or not?'

Suzanne, standing at the window of the suite, turned miserably. 'Frank, please. We've discussed it for hours and . . .'

The American shook his head grimly. 'No. We haven't discussed anything. I keep on asking and all you keep saying is "trust me".'

The distraught girl's temper flared. 'Is that such an unreasonable thing for a woman to ask her husband?'

'I catch you in Danny Wilde's room in the middle of the night and you think it's unreasonable of me to ask why? What's the matter with you? Have you flipped?'

'I've told you why. I went to talk to him. I needed advice.'

'Advice? At that time of night? Why couldn't you get advice from me?'

The girl turned unhappily back to the window. Frank had to move forward to catch her distressed voice. 'Frank – before you married me – do you remember our talking about my father?'

The American frowned impatiently. 'Let's not have all that again. You are you, and your father was someone else. And it was a long time ago – when you were a kid. I thought we'd agreed to bury and forget it.'

There were tears of frustration in the girl's eyes. 'You'll never understand, will you? Never!'

Frank swung round and made for the door. 'The only thing I understand is that I don't know what's wrong with you.' He yanked the door open. 'I'm going downstairs. I need a drink.'

The slam of the door made an ornament rattle. Suzanne stood frozen for a moment. Then, crying bitterly, she dropped into an armchair.

The whistle of the kettle made Claude Denton rise from his bed and cross over to the gas ring. Switching it off, he poured himself a cup of instant coffee. As he sipped it, he glanced down at his watch. Five minutes more and he would phone.

He stared at the room in distaste. A bed stood by the opposite wall, flanked by a wardrobe eaten with woodworm. An old chair, serving as a coat-hanger for his jacket, stood nearby. The only other furniture in the shabby room was a grease-stained food cupboard and a small table on which the phone rested.

His eyes cleared as they settled on the wardrobe. If things went well, in a few days, perhaps in a few hours, he would be able to begin a new life. Crossing over to the wardrobe he pulled out his despatch case and took out the bronze eagle. The feel of it in his hands seemed to reassure him. Setting it down on the table he picked up the telephone.

Two miles away across the city Verner had found a gap in the line of cars parked behind the hotel and was backing the Rolls Royce into it. In the rear of the car Marceau was watching Groski adjust the tiny receiver he was holding on his lap. The old man's eagerness had a febrile quality.

'Are you sure it will work?'

Groski gave him a look. 'It is the best equipment available and it has been thoroughly tested. Of course it will work.'

Fidgeting, Marceau turned and stared up at the towering hotel. 'Are you absolutely certain the transfer hasn't been made yet?'

Groski turned a tiny dial. 'I know how to carry out a search, Monsieur le Comte, and I made a very thorough one this morning when they were at breakfast. You can be assured the girl has not yet received the statuette.' He raised a hand as Marceau was about to speak. 'Listen!'

As Marceau took the earphone the agent was holding out, he heard a faint buzzing. He gave a start of excitement. 'That's someone phoning now, isn't it?'

Groski motioned him to keep silent. As the men listened they heard a girl's faint voice. 'Hello.'

A man answered her. 'Good day, Mrs Wager. I am now ready to talk business. Shall we meet?'

The girl sounded both frightened and anxious. 'All right. But where and when? Please tell me quickly. My husband might be back at any moment.'

'You haven't discussed this with your husband yet?'

'No. But don't worry. I have money of my own. Where do I find you?'

'Let us say in one hour's time. The address is apartment 9, Bois du Seine.'

His wrinkled face evil with triumph, Marceau waited to hear no more. Leaning forward he hammered on Verner's shoulder. 'Bois du Seine! As fast as you can drive!'

The room was as black as pitch. Danny sounded hoarse. 'How're you doing?'

For a few seconds there was no reply. Then a light clicked

on to reveal Danny and Brett standing in a photographer's studio. The photographer, a pleasant-faced young man with a blond beard, was agitating a print in a film washing tray. Half a minute later he drew it out.

'That's about as big as I can enlarge the section you want. Any good?'

Both men stared down at the limp print. It was a massive enlargement of the letters Danny was holding in his hand when the foyer photographer took his snapshot. Danny let out a yell of excitement. '9, Bois du Seine!'

Brett grinned at him. 'Always trust the movies.'

'Right. That's really something . . .' Then Danny's mood changed. 'Mind you, we still don't know that it's *his* address.'

Brett's stare was disapproving. 'Nothing's ever perfect for you, is it? You're just green because you didn't think of it. Look – the briefcase fell open and those were the letters that spilled out. Two and two make four, don't they?'

'Not always. Those letters could still belong to someone else.'

Brett was already at the door. 'The next move is to find out, isn't it? Come on.'

Ten minutes later Brett was driving through a warren of narrow streets while alongside him Danny studied a Paris road map. 'Second left, third right,' Danny announced. 'Then left and left again, over a bridge and second right.'

As he paused for breath Brett gave him a look. 'If you'd been navigating for Columbus, America would still be undiscovered.'

They entered a drab district of factories and shabby tenement houses. As they paused at a street corner, an old Rolls Royce drove out and passed them. For a moment Brett's eyes followed it as a cell of memory flashed. Then the car disappeared and the incident was forgotten.

The street they entered was alive with shouting, squabbling children. Checking the numbers, Danny halted Brett outside a tall tenement block. Battered garbage bins stood on either side of a low flight of steps. The front door, its paintwork blistered and peeling, opened into a dilapidated

hall. Ahead was a circular staircase. As they started towards it, the smell of stale food made Brett's nose wrinkle. 'Not exactly a stately home.'

'I've lived in worse,' Danny told him.

'I don't believe it.'

Danny nodded. 'A place we had in the Bronx one time was much worse than this. Mind you, they improved it later.'

'How?' Brett asked as they approached the first landing.

Danny grinned back. 'They tore it down and built a slum.'

The first landing was in semi-darkness. The window had been shattered by a stone and a large piece of hardboard kept out the daylight. 'Think you'd recognize this bird man again?' Brett asked as Danny peered at a door number.

The American shrugged. 'I hope so.'

There was a sudden scream, a scurry of footsteps, and Suzanne appeared on the staircase above them. She ran down a couple of steps and then clung to the balustrade for support. Danny gave an exclamation. 'Suzy!' Taking the steps three at a time he grabbed her. 'What's happened?'

Seeing the girl was half-hysterical with shock Brett ran on past them to the landing. Through an open door he could see a man lying face downwards on a threadbare carpet. As he knelt beside him Brett saw he was dead. An open despatch case lay on the floor a few feet away.

A moment later Danny and Suzanne entered the room. Although very pale and leaning on Danny for support, the girl had regained her self-control. Lowering her gently into the chair Danny approached the dead man.

'This the one?' Brett asked.

Danny nodded and picked up the empty briefcase. Shaking his head in disappointment he went back to the girl, his voice very gentle.

'What happened, Suzy? Who was he?'

Suzanne was still trembling from shock. 'I never knew his name. He kept on phoning me and finally he made this appointment for us to meet. And I found him like that . . .'

Brett joined Danny. 'Why did you want to meet him, Suzy?'

'He said he could prove my father's innocence.'

'Innocence of what?'

The white-faced girl stared up at Brett. 'Surely you must have heard the story?'

'I've heard the gossip. What were the facts?'

Suzanne lowered her head. 'There's not much to it. After the fall of Berlin, some secret papers were found. They proved that a titled member of the French Government had been a traitor and had helped bring about the French surrender.'

'Suzy's father came to be the fall guy,' Danny explained.

'He never had a chance to defend himself,' the girl said bitterly. 'People were looking for scapegoats in those days and public opinion condemned him out of hand. Before he could be tried he committed suicide and everyone took that to be an admission of his guilt.'

Brett indicated the dead body of Denton. 'Did he tell you what evidence he had to clear your father's name?'

'No. Only that he was willing to sell it to me for a large sum of money. When I arrived the door was closed. It wasn't until I opened it' – reaction began to affect the girl again – 'that I saw him lying there.'

Danny showed his sympathy. 'There's nothing you haven't told us?'

As the sobbing girl shook her head, Brett exchanged glances with Danny and nodded. 'There's nothing more we can do here. Let's get back to the hotel.'

Screwing a jeweller's glass into his wrinkled eye, Marceau lifted the bronze eagle reverently. He peered at it a moment, then gave a gasp of awe.

'He signed it for me, Verner. He actually signed it! Look' – the excited old man motioned the manservant closer – 'You see? His signature.'

As Verner tried to take the statuette, Marceau drew it back greedily. His expression was that of a man holding a sacred relic. 'His hand touched it, Verner. Think of that.'

Verner was gazing at the eagle with enormous reverence. 'He did you great honour, sir.'

Groski, standing alongside Verner, lit one of his gold-tipped cigarettes. 'He also put you into an embarrassing position, Monsieur le Comte. For if that evidence had fallen into the wrong hands after the war, they would have hanged you. A vulgar way to die, hanging. There is no finesse in a hemp rope.'

He received no reply. Both Marceau and Verner were giving their entire attention to the statuette. Verner tried the old man again. 'May I, sir?'

Marceau hesitated before holding out the eagle. 'Be careful! Take it in both hands.'

Verner examined the statuette with loving care. 'So many years of searching and disappointments, sir.'

'An eternity, Verner. But worth every second of it now. Think of it . . . his signature. A thing beyond price.'

Clearly reluctant to part with the statuette, Verner sighed and handed it back. 'Priceless as you say, sir. A tragedy that it must be destroyed.'

Reacting with horror, the old man clutched the eagle to his bony chest. 'Destroy it! Destroy this . . .' Then his puppet-like figure sagged as if the strings supporting it had given way. 'Yes, of course. You are right, Verner. It must be destroyed.'

CHAPTER SIX

Pacing past the window of his suite, Brett gave a sudden exclamation. 'The Rolls Royce!'

Surprised at the Englishman's uncharacteristic excitement, Danny turned and stared. 'What Rolls Royce?'

'The common factor,' Brett explained. 'There's always a common factor. Listen. This might be pretty far out but it also might be important.'

Danny was listening hard. 'Go on.'

'You remember the man I chased out into the street who got himself shot?'

'Will I ever forget?' Danny asked painfully.

'There was a Rolls Royce parked just down the street.'

Danny relaxed, looking disappointed. 'The front of the place is littered with them.'

'This wasn't the front – it was the back. And this one was old and very distinctive – cream and green. The point is – I believe I saw it today. Coming out of the street where the bird man was killed.'

Danny was becoming infected by Brett's excitement. 'Could we trace it?'

'There's certain to be quite a few of that vintage. I think I can get a list. There's a man in Paris who looks after my uncle's Rolls-Royces when he's on the Continent.'

For a moment there was a brief return of Danny's egalitarianism. 'Rolls *Royces*!' Then he led Brett to the door. 'It's worth a try. Go ahead. And in the meantime I'll do a bit of research on the Marquis de Villeigne affair.'

Verner opened the door and gazed into the huge sitting room. 'Monsieur!'

There was no reply. The late afternoon sun, shining through the french windows, was blinding. As the manservant crossed the room and drew the curtains closed, he heard a murmuring voice.

Marceau, cuddling the bronze eagle as if it were a living creature, was half-hidden in an armchair. For an uneasy moment Verner wondered if his mind had gone. He cleared his throat. 'Monsieur?'

This time the old man glanced at him. His voice was impatient but lucid. 'What is it, Verner?'

Verner reached out a gentle hand. 'Forgive me, Monsieur le Comte. But don't you think it is time that we . . .'

Clutching the bird protectively, the old man shrank back. 'Not yet, Verner. Not just yet.'

'But sir, it is dangerous to wait!'

'A little longer, Verner. Just a little longer.'

Verner hesitated, then surrendered. As he walked towards the door he again heard the old man murmuring reverently to the statuette.

Danny added the book to the pile of reference books on the table alongside him. All four of them contained bookmarks. As he picked up a fifth book, Brett entered the suite. His expression made Danny's own face drop. 'No good?'

Brett held out a scrap of paper. 'I've got a list but it doesn't seem to help. It reads like a list of the French "Four Hundred". Listen to this: "Le Duc du Vallaise; the Comtesse Ferenac, le Comte Marceau, Baron Koro, la Duchesse Severet, etc, etc." All aged and revered figures.'

As he flopped into a chair, Danny took the list from him. 'I've come across one of those names before. The Comte Marceau.' Turning, he began flipping through the book marks. 'I'll find it in a minute.'

'What about the Marquis de Villeigne,' Brett asked, watching him. 'Find anything new?'

Danny shook his head. 'Nothing we didn't know before.' He gave a start. 'Here it is. Le Comte Clement Marceau. He was a member of the government at the time of the capitulation.' He stared triumphantly at Brett. 'That means he must have served with Suzy's old man!'

The Englishman looked doubtful. 'It's a link, I suppose, but it's a pretty thin one.'

'Got anything better?' Danny asked aggressively.

'No,' Brett confessed.

Danny slammed the book closed and jumped to his feet. 'Then let's find Marceau's address and pay him a visit.'

The summer evening was chilly and the old man's armchair was drawn up close to a coal fire. Its flickering glow showed him to be huddled up asleep. Verner straightened and switched on a table lamp. Marceau's stertorous breathing checked as he stirred and woke. The manservant bent over him apologetically.

'It's time for you to go bed, sir.'

The old man stared at him blankly for a moment. 'Bed? Oh yes. Is it so late?'

Verner put an arm under his frail shoulders and lifted him. 'Yes, sir.' His eyes fell on the empty armchair. 'The bird, sir! What have you done with it?'

He received a sigh of despair. 'Gone, Verner. Gone.'

The manservant looked startled. 'What do you mean?'

'Gone,' Marceau muttered. 'Into the furnace. Just as much molten metal now. Think of it, Verner. A thing so precious. With *his* signature on it.'

There was a deep satisfaction in the manservant's voice as he led the old count towards the door. 'It is a tragic loss, sir, but never mind. It means no one can touch us now. At last we are safe.'

At Danny's signal, Brett released his grip on the top of the wall and dropped alongside the American. Around them were tall trees and shrubs. As they started silently forward a nightingale broke into song and the scent of night stocks drifted towards them. Brett sighed.

'You know something? I've never felt further away from crime.'

Danny scowled. 'You know something? Because you own a few places like this, you won't admit guys who live in them can be hoods.'

As the trees fell away the chateau appeared, stately against the night sky. The entire front appeared to be in darkness. Crouched behind a bush, Brett gave another sigh. 'It looks as if no one's at home either.'

'How d'you know that?' Danny demanded. 'There could be a hundred hoods hiding round the back.'

Covered by the shadows and the ornamental shrubs, they came to a path that forked two ways as it approached the chateau. As Brett took the left fork, Danny checked him. 'Where are you going?'

'Isn't it obvious? This is the better way.'

Danny indicated the right fork. 'Not to me it isn't. That's the way.'

Brett gave a resigned look. 'You know, I get tired of winning bets from you. How much?'

'The usual.'

'Conditions?'

'None,' Danny told him. 'Just that I'll be in there before you.'

'Done,' Brett told him, starting away.

Grinning to himself, Danny hurried down the righthand path. His expression changed as the path ended in a rockery. Groping about in the shadows he stepped up to his ankles in a small fishpond. Muttering darkly, he reached a low bank and slid down it. A lawn reached out before him. Bending double, he ran across it and flattened against the chateau wall. Edging sideways until he reached a pair of french windows he peered through them. Except for the faint glow of a fire, the room was in darkness. Sliding a penknife from his pocket Danny began work on the lock. Five minutes and three skinned knuckles later, he forced back the door and stepped triumphantly into a large room.

Tip-toeing across the thick carpet he froze as a table light clicked on and he saw Brett sitting in an armchair with a decanter of spirits on a table alongside him. Looking relaxed and comfortable, the Englishman gave him a nonchalant nod.

'I thought you'd never get here. I win.'

Danny's face was a study. 'How did you make it so fast?'

'Simple. I rang the front door bell.'

'You what? That's cheating!'

Brett raised an eyebrow. 'Certainly not. However, my plan contained one tiny flaw.'

Danny moved closer. 'What's that?'

'You were right about chateaux and hoods,' Brett told him. 'We've one with us at the moment. Over there.'

Following his nod, Danny saw the tall figure of Groski step out from an alcove near the fireplace. Pistol levelled, he gave the American a polite nod. 'Good evening.'

Brett lifted his hands to show Danny they were tightly tied. 'I'd have warned you but he made all sorts of ugly

threats about killing me. And you know how sensitive I am about dying.'

Danny was assessing the amused Groski. 'What's supposed to happen now?'

Groski moved in front of the fireplace so that he could cover the two men more easily. 'What do you expect? Your very presence here shows you know far too much. So what alternative is left me but to help you across the river Styx.'

Brett looked amused at Danny's stare. 'In his quaint way he's saying he's going to kill us.'

'But with dignity,' the smiling Groski assured them.

Danny gave a hollow laugh. 'Naturally. I wouldn't want to go any other way.'

Reaching for the decanter, Brett awkwardly poured himself a large drink. 'In the circumstances I feel sure you won't mind if I have one for the trip.'

'By all means. You may pour one for your friend if you wish.'

'There's something I'd rather have than a drink,' Danny said. 'Why was that bronze bird so important?'

He received a smile of regret. 'I'm afraid that is something you can never know.'

All three men turned as Verner entered the room. 'I've searched the grounds and there's no sign of anyone.' Then he caught sight of the two prisoners. His violent start made Groski smile.

'It was easy, Verner. They walked in and asked to be captured. What do you suggest I do with them?'

There was no compassion on the manservant's hard face. 'There is an old well in the grounds. A very deep one.'

'Excellent.' Turning, Groski jerked his pistol. 'Shall we go?'

Still holding the large drink in his hands, Brett rose from the armchair. Danny, who looked ready to spring the moment Groski made a slip, backed reluctantly towards the french windows. As Groski's pistol followed him, Brett raised his glass. 'Good health.'

In the same movement he hurled the neat spirit into the

fire. There was a roar and a huge gout of flame. Caught by surprise, Groski jumped aside and Danny took his chance. Grabbing the man's pistol arm, he drove a heavy punch into his stomach. A moment later both men were engaged in a life and death struggle a couple of yards from the blazing fire.

By the door, Verner had drawn his pistol but Brett leapt over the armchair and was on him before he could pull the trigger. Using his bound hands as a club, the Englishman brought them down alongside the man's neck. The pistol fell to the floor as Verner staggered back. Immensely strong, he recovered almost at once, threw himself at Brett, and brought his head up beneath the Englishman's chin. Handicapped by his tied hands, Brett stumbled and Verner dropped on him.

Over by the fire Danny was having no easy time with Groski: slim though he was, the man was all bone and sinew. The struggle centred on the pistol the two grappling men were clutching. As they rolled over and over, Danny's head thudded against the foot of a cabinet. Momentarily dazed, he saw Groski's contorted face inches above his own. With the pistol locked between them, both men made a supreme effort. Veins rose like cords on Groski's forehead and blood-red stars burst before Danny's eyes. Suddenly there was a muffled explosion. Groski stiffened as though in triumph, then slumped sideways. Glancing round Danny saw Verner kneeling over Brett with his hands round the Englishman's throat. Pushing away Groski's body, Danny snatched up the pistol and levelled it.

'All right. On your feet!'

Recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, Verner allowed Brett to rise. Feeling his neck ruefully, the Englishman extended his hands to the manservant. As Verner released the knots, Marceau appeared in the doorway. Wearing a voluminous dressing gown, he looked lost and frightened.

'What is it, Verner? What is happening?'

Verner was quick to respond. 'You must say nothing,

Monsieur le Comte! We will face charges but not for our part in making history. The evidence of that has gone for ever. So keep silent, I beg you.'

The old man was not listening. He had seen Groski's body and his hands clutched involuntarily at his chest. The movement disturbed the folds of his robe and something heavy thudded to the floor.

Verner stared down in horror. A lifetime of deference left him as his eyes rose accusingly to the trembling old man.

'You fool,' he said thickly. 'You stupid, cowardly old fool!'

Marceau drew back, his voice a piteous whine. 'I couldn't do it, Verner. Not with his name on it.'

Brett picked up the bronze eagle and gave a start. 'Listen to this! Roughly translated, it reads: 'To Comte Marceau for his role in making France a part of the Glorious Fatherland.' He tossed the bird at Danny 'Look at the signature!'

Danny looked and blinked hard. 'You know something? I think this is going to make Suzy happy.'

There was a scene of unqualified joy in Danny's sitting room later that day. Suzanne, holding the bronze eagle, was almost inarticulate with gratitude as she gazed at the smiling Danny and Brett.

'I . . . I don't know what to say. I can't ever thank you both enough . . .'

Running impulsively forward, she kissed Brett and then flung her arms around Danny. Eyeing the warmth of the embrace, Brett felt it his duty to offer a warning to the grinning American.

'Watch it. The way your luck's running, it's three to one you might have an unwelcome visitor.'

As if his words were a catalyst, Frank appeared in the doorway. With Suzanne and Danny frozen in their embrace, there was a moment of horrified silence. Then, dissolving into fury, Frank moved forward. His arms outstretched, Danny tore away from the girl and backed towards Brett. 'Oh, no! . . . Not again!'

Frank's punch began at his feet and gathered speed all the way towards Danny's jaw. The American ducked and Brett took the punch on the cheek. As he sank groggily to the carpet, Danny managed a serve-you-right grin before Frank came after him again. Crying her protest, Suzanne ran between the two men. 'No, Frank! Stop it! Look at this . . .'

She swung up the heavy bronze eagle. The gesture, extravagant in its effort to convince Frank, proved Danny's undoing. Catching him on the jaw it dropped him on the carpet alongside Brett. As Suzanne let out a cry of distress, Frank grabbed her arm and dragged her from the suite.

The two men were left nursing their injuries. Showing no malice but only resignation at the injustice of fate, Danny turned to Brett.

'You know something? I can't take any more of this. I'm going to join a monastery.'

Brett was still looking dazed. 'Do they have girls there?'

Danny thought a moment. 'The one I'm going to does.'

'You're sure?'

'Absolutely.'

'And they're single?'

'Definitely,' Danny said with feeling.

Fingering his cheek as he sat up, Brett winced. 'In that case I think I'll come with you.'

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